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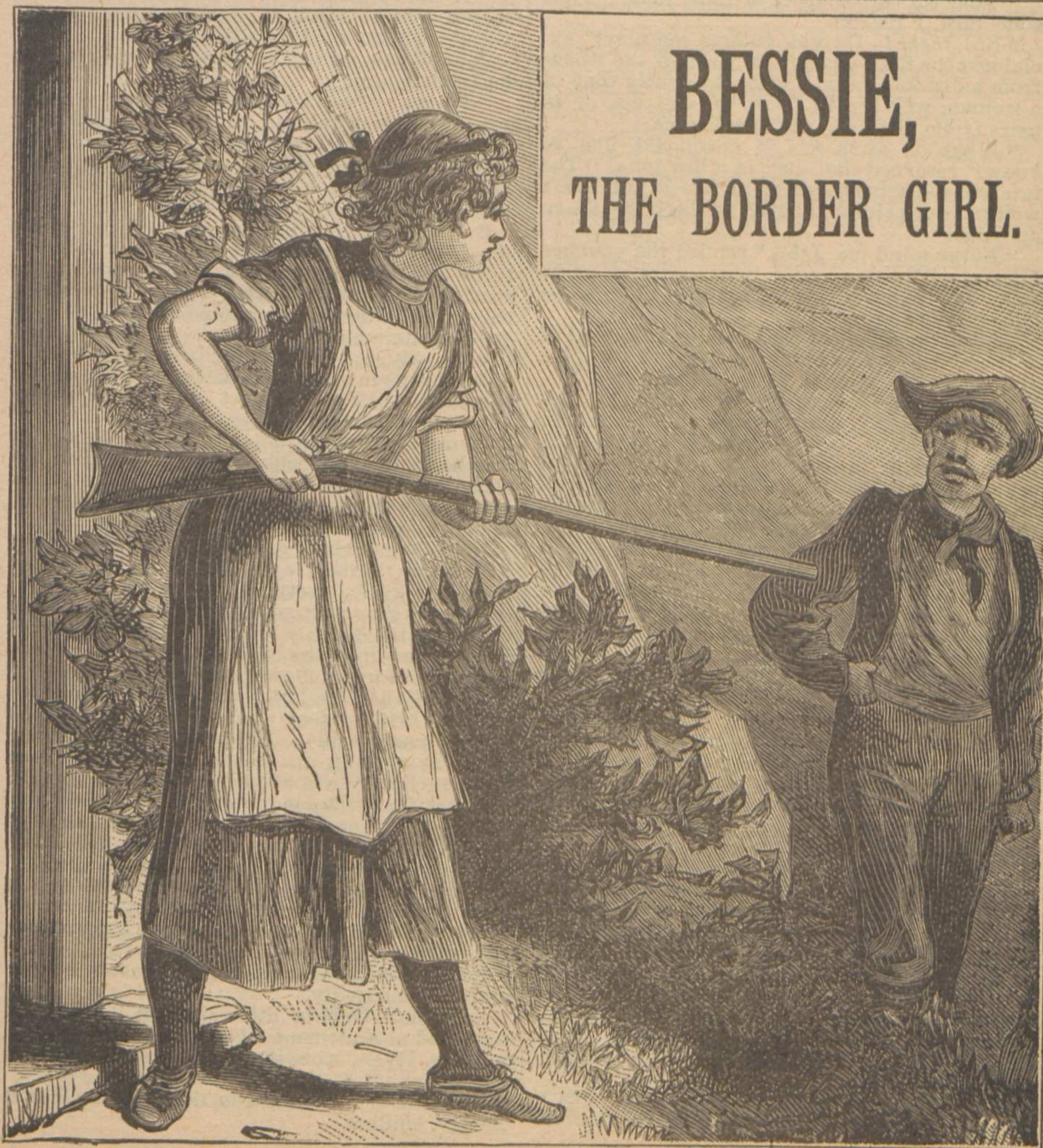
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BESSIE, THE BORDER GIRL.

Queen Bessie, THE BORDER GIRL.

A Romance of the Kanawha.

BY HENRY J. THOMAS.

CHAPTER I.

BESSIE.

"HARK!"

"I didn't hear anything!"

"I did—listen! It was a human scream!"

"Your ears are sharper 'n mine, then. 'Twas some bird, I reckon."

"No! *there!* Do you believe me now?" exclaimed the first speaker, as through the woods from a distance came a voice, evidently that of a woman, whether in terror or distress, or in mere frolic, it was hard to determine.

"What on airth *kin* it mean, I'd like to know!" returned the other, in a low tone. "The infernal red-skins round ag'in like as not. Look well to your primin', Bently, an' keep two sharp eyes out!"

"Never mind me, John," replied the younger hunter, with a dry smile; "take care of *yourself*. I was never yet caught napping when danger was around!"

The surroundings of the speakers were that of a dense, wild forest—such as covered the hills and vales of that portion of the "Old Dominion," later known as Western Virginia. The time was nearly a century ago. The solemn silence, of those lonely recesses was seldom broken, save by the stealthy tread or discordant cry of some beast of prey, the ringing notes of birds, or perhaps the sharp crack of the hunter's rifle, as he brought low the tempting game; and, alas! there sometimes were heard the yells of hate, the shout of triumph and despair, the cries of pain and terror, when the merciless and blood-loving savage, bursting in from his lair like a wild animal, strove to exterminate the "pale-face" settler, whose ax and plow threatened to turn those hunting-grounds into tilled fields.

The two men whose quick ears had caught the unusual sounds were of the hardy race of pioneers, to whose strong arms and matchless heroism this country owes much of its greatness—men who seemed born to pilot civilization in its struggle with barbarism and nature in its primeval estate.

They stood now in the glade made by the passage of a small stream, where it crossed the narrow and imperfectly cleared road leading from Fort Kyle to the plantation beyond, up the noble Kanawha valley. They were dressed in hunting frocks, coonskin caps, buckskin breeches, leggings and moccasins, with the indispensable powder-horn at their side, and the trusty blades in their belts, ready at all times for an encounter with their foes, either human or animal.

John Ryan, the elder of the twain, was a middle-aged man, of well-knit frame, resolute

bearing, and a keen, dark eye, that betokened a courage and will equal to any danger, and yet the kindly expression which really characterized his rough, bearded face, indicated the man of admirable social qualities—the agreeable companion.

The younger was quite a contrast in personal appearance. Although equally resolute in spirit and hardy in frame, there was about him an air of refinement, a charm of face, and a mellowness of voice, that revealed the gentleman born, independent of the polish of refined society. In character, neither cold nor calculating, nor yet enthusiastic to excess, Will Bently was ever ready, with heart and hand, to serve a friend or neighbor.

After listening and watching for a few moments in silence, the younger man again spoke:

"It didn't seem to be a scream of terror. I should almost think it was laughter if this wasn't such an unlikely place for it."

John Ryan smiled as though a new thought had struck him:

"I'll bet my cap I know now what skeered us so! Hold on a minnit. I hear the clatter of horses' feet, and I reckon I know who it is a-comin'. Jest step aside to this tree, kinder out of sight till they come up; you kin see them afore they'll see you. Here they come!"

By this time the sharp beat of horses' hoofs was heard close at hand, and in another moment there appeared around the abrupt bend in the road just before them two women upon horseback, one of whom was mounted in a manner that drew an exclamation of surprise and admiration from Bently, as he involuntarily stepped from his hiding-place in order to get a better view of the equestrians. The foremost rider, a shouting, laughing girl, stood upright upon the back of her unsaddled horse, holding a rein lightly in one hand, looking back upon her rival in the race, who followed close behind, mounted, as was very common in those days among the women of the frontier, astride, like a man.

No wonder Bently gazed almost like one spell-bound, for the dark eyes of the flying damsel gave one swift, electrical glance directly into his own as she sped past, and drew his gaze after her, until the queenly form, so firmly and gracefully poised upon the back of the fleet animal, disappeared in a hollow in the wood.

Scarcely had the last rider passed from view when a thrill of fear startled the blood in the young man's veins. The leading horse, riderless, was rushing up the opposite slope. In a moment Bently was at the scene of accident, to discover the girl upon the ground where she had fallen from her steed. Fearing that she was seriously injured, he hastened to her side, but, before he quite reached the spot where she lay, she rose to her feet, and looking around in a half-bewildered manner, as though scarcely realizing her situation, encountered the anxious gaze of Bently.

"Miss Ryan, are you much hurt?" he exclaimed, hurriedly.

"Oh, no! Only a little stunned. Lightfoot stumbled at a moment when I was looking back for Mrs. Ryan, who, it seems, means to desert me!"

"I think it was *you* who deserted her!" said Bently, smiling.

"Well, at all events, she has had time to come up. I wonder what detains her?"

"You need not be alarmed about her; her husband was with me by the brook. Did you not see him as you passed?"

"Why, no, I didn't. I suppose I shall receive a scolding if brother John saw me riding in that style."

"Well, here they come," replied Bently. "If you need a protector, call upon me."

"I can defend myself, thank you!" replied Bessie Ryan, with a saucy smile in her bright eyes.

"Well, Bess!" said John Ryan, as he and his wife came up, "you and Will seem to be having a pleasant chat. Where's yer horse?"

"Gone home, I reckon; he had his head that way the last I saw of him!" replied the girl.

"Ha-ha, my girl! He *threwed* ye, did he? Well, I've told ye more'n once that you'd break yer neck yet, with yer reckless capers!"

"My neck's as sound as ever, brother John. Why didn't you lay your authority on Kate? She rode as hard as I."

"You may ride as hard as yer please, ef ye'll ride the same way *she* does," answered Ryan, half-laughing, and pinching the red cheek of his sister till it glowed with a still deeper hue. "But come! get up behind Kate, and let's make fur home; it's gittin' late!"

The Ryan plantation lay about three miles below Fort Kyle and the little village of log-cabins which clustered around it. John Ryan, tempted by the beauty of the spot, had settled upon it several years before, and, although many times obliged to abandon it and fly with his family to the fort for safety, yet, with a perseverance and bravery that at times were reckless, he returned again to the place, and erected a new cabin upon the ruins of the old, which had been destroyed by the disappointed and revengeful enemy.

There had been quite a long time of comparative peace and safety. The Indians seemed disposed to be friendly, and the settlers, feeling more secure, ventured further from the fort and village, and made rapid progress in the clearing and improving of their farms, well back from and down the river. A brief glance at the history of Bessie Ryan will explain the unusual circumstance of a young woman of her beauty and refinement living amid such wild scenes and so rude a society.

Born in one of the oldest cities of the Atlantic coast, Bessie had enjoyed superior advantages of education. Many years before, and while Bessie was yet a child, her brother John had passed the Blue Ridge, and penetrated beyond the then frontier; and when, about two years before the time of this narrative, her parents died, leaving her without a permanent home, or any near relations, she resolved to seek her brother, and gratify a long-cherished desire to share the fortunes of those courageous people, for whose daring and fortitude she entertained the highest admiration.

A mingling of romance, enthusiasm, and thorough good sense in her character, formed a rather unusual combination of active qualities, and made her a leading spirit in the settlement, where she soon became known as "Queen Bess."

A fearless and most skillful rider, a good rifle-shot, she was admirably "at home" in the forest, and among the rough, wild men whom she met almost daily, she moved a veritable forest queen—a kind of pride and pet of all. She was, indeed, born for a heroine and—became one!

CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW.

THE rude but comfortable log-cabin in which John Ryan's family resided, stood upon the summit of a long and gentle slope, at the foot of which ran a deep river, while a sparkling little brook, which issued from a spring near at hand, bubbled and danced by the door. Beyond the house was a young apple-orchard, whose thrifty growth gave promise of an ample reward for the labor bestowed upon it; upon the south side of the slope was a nursery of peach trees; stretching away to the west were the cleared fields, where the broad, dark-green leaves of the thriving corn waved in the summer breeze; all—the settler's whole estate—was encircled by the wall of mighty forest, which stretched to the south, north and west in immeasurable distances.

A narrow, zig-zag path led from the door of the cabin, down to the Kanawha and up to the spring head, over which was a platform, consisting of one large, white slab of stone, through which an aperture had been cut sufficiently large to admit of a bucket in dipping up the water. By its side stood a large spring-house, built also of stone, and not yet quite finished—still lacking a roof.

In the cheerful light of the early midsummer morning, every thing wore an aspect of peace and quiet loveliness, which—should the destroying hand of the ruthless savage but be withheld—would soon spread over the surrounding wilderness.

Bessie Ryan, as she tripped through the dewy grass on her way to the spring-house, with her rich black hair twined round her stately head in long, encircling braids, and her queen-like form clad in the simple muslin dress of the times, formed a picture charmingly appropriate to the scene. In her happiest mood, she was singing a favorite melody, in a voice of exquisite sweetness, that came back to her from forest and hill in mocking echoes.

She sung:

"On the shore the shell is lying,
Sadly for the blue depths sighing,
And the low-voiced waves replying,
'Thine no more, the pearl-strewn sea!'

'Bear me to the sea-isles, glowing
In the emerald light down-flowing,
Where my soul is ever going
To its home beneath the sea.'

"So all day my heart is singing
Low and plaintive pleadings—bringing,
Mem'ries sweet, that, round it clinging,
Draw me still, beloved, to thee."

As she finished her song, she was startled by an apparition which caused her to pour a portion of the foaming milk in her pail, upon the flags of the spring-house floor, instead of into the bright pans prepared to receive it. The

rich color in her cheeks deepened to a bright crimson.

"Draw me, still, beloved, to thee!" echoed from the lips of Bently, as he appeared in the spring-house door, and a roguish smile betrayed his enjoyment of her confusion.

"You nearly surprised me!" she exclaimed, recovering herself, "and you see the mischief you have done!"

"Yes, I see; but I thought you too much of a backwoods heroine to be taken by surprise; though you were caught off your guard the other day when you fell off your horse and didn't wait for me to pick you up."

"I'll profit by the lesson, and be more on my guard in the future," she answered, archly. "Even the real Queen Bess, you know, could be surprised into nervousness by too much gallantry on the part of her courtiers."

"Well, Bessie, seriously, we have all of us occasion to be upon our guard. Reports are coming in daily of the depredations of the Indians; they are said to be again upon the war-path, and I am about setting out with a small party of scouts to ascertain their whereabouts and numbers."

"When are you coming back?" asked the maiden, with a face at once sobered into seriousness.

"It is not likely that we will be gone many days; but, if I shouldn't come back *at all*, what then?" he asked, in a manner half earnest, half jesting.

"We must not think of such an 'if,'" said the young woman, quietly; "and yet," she added, with compressed lips and flashing eyes, "if harm should befall you, you shall be avenged!"

"What a heroine you are, Bessie!" said Bently, laughing. "Do you really suppose that you could hit an Indian if you should fire at one?"

"You seem to doubt my skill," she replied, as if annoyed by his want of faith in her forest accomplishments; and taking the rifle from his hand, she proceeded down the path toward the house, until they came opposite a tall elm stump that stood across the brook.

"Do you see that target yonder?" she said. "I placed it there yesterday, for an hour's practice. If I hit the center, you must do the same!" And taking aim, the young girl fired.

The performance was greeted by a shout of mingled voices just behind her, and, turning, Bessie discovered that a number of men, the companions of Bently upon the scouting expedition, were looking on. Two of them started for the target, and, returning, reported but a slight variation from the center.

"Well done!" exclaimed Bently, with evident admiration. "I confess to no doubt, now, as to your skill."

"*Mighty* well done, fur a gal! By Jinks! I don't think many of us fellers could beat that ar'!" cried a rough-looking fellow named Joe Sykes.

"You must 'a' taken a heap of pains a-trainin' of 'er sence she come out here in the woods," rejoined another of the group, to John Ryan, who now came up.

"No, she took it of her own accord," quietly replied Ryan, "just as she takes every thing else."

"She oughter be called King Bess, then," added one of the settlers, laughing.

"She's the right grit, by Jinks!" again exclaimed Joe Sykes, quite carried away in his admiration. "We'll have to make her Captin' Bess—ho! ho! I'll go in for high private in her company, by Jinks!"

"Well, boys, let's be a-movin'," exclaimed another of the company. "We ar' out on service. If the reds ar' around us, we mustn't let our shoes freeze to the ground."

The men, shouldering their rifles, began to wind down the narrow path leading from the house to the broader road which ran along the river—Joe Sykes, whose special peculiarity it was that he could never entertain more than one idea at a time, muttering to himself all the way down, "Nice gal, by Jinks!"

A few days after this John Ryan rode over to the fort to learn the report of such scouts as had come in, and to ascertain the probabilities of an attack by the Indians.

The news brought in was gloomy enough. Unprotected settlers in every direction had been murdered, and their cabins and crops destroyed. As he rode slowly back toward his farm, he thought of the years of hard labor bestowed upon that spot in the wilderness; of the hardships endured, of the dangers but barely escaped; of the brave little wife, the innocent children, the lovely and dependent sister—all, all might be swept away in one brief moment, as it were, by the hands of the red fiends.

As he reached the door, he flung himself from the saddle, and giving the bridle into the hands of the black boy who stood waiting to receive it, he sat down upon the door-step and removed his hat, to wipe the perspiration from his brow. His wife hastened to the door.

"What is the news, John?" she exclaimed.

"Bad!" he replied. "The very mischief is to pay. The reds have broken loose, and blood is running. We are in for another run to the fort, I fear."

"Has anything been heard from the men who went from here the other morning?" asked Bessie.

"Yes; they have gone on down the river to get such information as they can. Two scouts, in from the Cheat river, report the Shawnees and Delawares to be on the war-path, and that's not far off, you know."

"We must go to the fort!" exclaimed Mrs. Ryan, in her quick, emphatic way. "I've had a feelin' fur some time that something was goin' to happen; an' last night I dreamt of seein' yer heart's blood, John, an' that's a *sure* sign!"

"I know thur's trouble ahead, Kate; it's mighty queer, but I've had *my* signs, too." The strong, brave man spoke despondingly.

"What hev you seen, John? I thought you didn't b'lieve in signs an' warnin's," said his wife, now thoroughly aroused.

"No more I don't," replied the pioneer; "still, it's kind o' curious. As I was a-comin' along home, I saw somethin' layin' in the road that looked like a big clot o' blood. Wal, I got down an' tuk a stick an' turned it over, an' found 'twas a piece of fresh liver. Ther wa'n't no signs of anything else anywhar else around, fur I looked all round keerfully. Now, how it

come thar, right in my path, is what puzzles me."

"Some animal may have been killed near there, and a part of it dropped in the road; or, perhaps it was carried there by some wild beast," suggested his sister.

"No, no!" exclaimed her sister-in-law, excitedly, "it's a warnin'—I know it is."

"Wal, I haven't told you about the blood at the spring yit. When I went down there yesterday mornin' fur water, I saw three drops of blood on the stone. I put my hand up to my nose to see if it was bleedin', but 'twasn't bloody; then I stooped over to dip up the water, and jest exactly three drops of blood fell from my nose. Now, wa'n't that kind o' queer?"

"I tell you we're warned, and must go to the fort to save us all from bein' murdered!" repeated Mrs. Ryan, looking around apprehensively at her two children, and her dark eyes glowing with a superstitious fear.

"Wal, I'll take you over to-morrow. I'll have to come back, though, to see to things. The corn must be hoed, and them boys wouldn't begin to stay ef I warn't here too."

"I think that the corn had better suffer than for you to expose your life," said Bessie.

"I kin take keer of myself if you women an' children ar' in a safe place. Ef the fort is really attacked before I git back there, they must contrive to let me know, fur they'll need all the help they ken scare up to defend it."

Mrs. Ryan remained silent and serious, though busying herself in making preparations for going to the fort in the morning. The superstition so prevalent in those days had a strong hold upon her mind, and in the perilous times at hand, the incidents of the liver and the drops of blood had great significance to her.

They retired to their beds, prepared for an attack and almost expecting it, but daybreak found them unmolested; and the cheerful influence of a bright summer morning dispelled much of their fear. Still, they hastened their preparations for departure, and early in the forenoon they took leave of the "Silver Spring Plantation."

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST BLOW.

REACHING the fort, they found that the condition of things fully justified them in leaving the farm. The settlers were rapidly gathering from all quarters, in great alarm, seeking the protection afforded by the fort.

As the danger did not seem to be immediately at hand, John Ryan determined, the next morning, to go over to his farm for the day, promising his wife, however, that he would return before night. Receiving over and over again her emphatic charge to "be watchful, and take keer of himself," he went forth—alas! to return no more.

A busy scene was now presented at the fort, though but five men were left within it—most all the band having sallied out to obtain something like a definite knowledge of the foe supposed to be lurking near. Some of the women were making a great ado; others were calmly and industriously helping to get things into a

state of order and preparation; bullets were molded, patches were cut, water was brought, while all anxiously watched for the return of the scouts. Women, straining their eyes at the loop-holes of the block-house, strove to discover some token of the return of husband, father or brother. Children were there—some with terrified countenances listening to the excited talk of their elders; others bravely declaring their ability to take a part in defending themselves and the fort; but all dreading what each hour might bring forth. Whether the result should be a return to their homes, or the opening of actual hostilities, a few hours must determine.

"What do you see Kate?" asked Bessie coming up behind Mrs. Ryan, as she stood at one of the loop-holes, anxiously gazing down the river-road over which John Ryan must come on his return.

"Don't see nothin'. Wish I did!" was the reply, in the sharp, short manner peculiar to herself, as Mrs. Ryan turned away from her long scrutiny.

"You can't expect John back so early in the day as this," replied the younger woman, quietly, though her own face was indicative of extreme anxiety, and her nervousness could scarcely be suppressed.

"He'd better 'a' left everything on the place go to ruin than to give his scalp to the redskins. I'm afeard we'll never see him ag'in. Them warnin's went fur nothin'!" replied Mrs. Ryan, gloomily.

"We must hope for the best," said Bessie, as she took the station her sister-in-law had just left. After watching for more than an hour, she was about to retire from her post, when she caught sight of an object that riveted her attention.

"Kate! come here. Isn't this Pete coming?" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Ryan hastened to the spot.

"Lord a-mercy!" she cried, in great agitation, "it's Pete runnin' fur dear life! I *knowed* somethin' would happen!" and she wrung her hands in a perfect frenzy of excitement, then rushed out toward the gate, followed by Bessie, who was the first to question the negro "boy," after he was admitted within the gate.

"Oh, Missee Kate! it's clean done—da's bofe killed dead!" exclaimed the terrified creature, as quickly as he could recover breath enough to speak.

The horrified listeners besought him to explain, but he seemed scarcely to realize that he was out of danger, and could not, for several moments collect his thoughts sufficiently to give any thing like a clear account of the occurrence.

When the announcement of her husband's death first greeted her ears, Mrs. Ryan seemed utterly overwhelmed with despair—wringing her hands, and looking from one to another in speechless agony; but after a few moments, she became suddenly calm and quiet—turning away from all attempts at consolation, with lips compressed painfully close, and a peculiar gleam in her black eyes, which seemed to grow more intense, as she listened to the details of the murder.

We will not undertake to relate the story in the words of Black Pete, broken as it was by frequent interruptions from the eager listeners gathered around, but will give the substance of the black's account:

Ryan was plowing, while his two men, not far away, were hoeing corn. Suddenly, without a note of warning, they heard the sharp crack of a dozen rifles, and Ryan's horse fell dead in the furrow. One of the slaves, also, dropped where he stood, mortally wounded; the other, Pete, managed to gain the woods under cover of the tall corn, while the Indians were intent upon the death of his master.

Ryan started to run for the house, making his course as zig zag as possible, to confuse the aim of his pursuers, but before he had gained half the distance he was struck by a rifle-ball. He continued running, however, until he had reached the nursery of peach-trees, where he fell lifeless.

He was a long-desired victim, for his indomitable energy, bravery and skill had made him an object of special hatred to the Indians. The savages, overjoyed at his death, rushed forward with yells of triumph, and gathering around the still warm body, they tore off the scalp. Then, kindling a fire, they began their deliberate preparations for a horrid rite. First they cut open the breast, and took out the so lately beating heart. This they solemnly proceeded to roast before the fire. It was then gravely divided and eaten. This rite was performed in accordance with a belief prevalent among the savages, that *to partake of the heart of a brave warrior would impart the like quality to those who ate of it.*

The sorrow that might have crushed Kate Ryan at another time, seemed to be turned into a fierce and burning hatred of the Indians, and every thought was at once directed toward revenge. From the loving wife, she became the implacable widow, whose sorrow for her great loss was reserved for the night, when she could weep and no eye behold her.

As evening came on, all was excitement and confusion within the fort. With but five men, and an attack during the night almost certain, no wonder there were forebodings among those who had sought refuge within the strong log walls.

Bessie Ryan, too much shocked and grieved at the awful fate which had befallen her brave and trusty brother, to mingle with those who gathered in groups to discuss the one topic of interest, stood silent and sad at one of the loop-holes of the block-house, gazing out toward the wilderness. The sun was sinking below the horizon, tangling the golden trail of his mantle among the interlacing boughs, and leaving its bright fragments on tree-top and distant hill. As length her quick eye caught sight of a form emerging from the forest-path; her heart beat more rapidly, and a slight flush rose to her pale cheek; it was Will Bently who approached. Soon another and another appeared. The good tidings quickly spread, and in a few moments the gate was opened to admit the scouts within the fort.

"It is a great satisfaction to find you here," said Will, to the sorrowing girl, the first time

he had an opportunity of speaking to her. "I was fearful that John might delay, and your escape be cut off."

"As, in 'eed, it very nearly was; we narrowly missed sharing the fate of poor John. If he had but staid here with us!" replied Bessie, with a trembling voice.

Night fell, and passed quietly. Morning came, and found the little garrison still awaiting the attack—a morning destined to add a new grief to that which had already wrung the heart of Kate Ryan. A woman in the fort, who had a painful gathering upon her hand, had sent her own boy and little Johnny Ryan, without his mother's knowledge or consent, out of the post inclosure to a large walnut-tree, which stood close to the bank of the river, to procure a green walnut for use upon her hand. Mrs. Ryan, attracted by the screams of some women, rushed to the spot from which they were gazing, to discover the two boys struggling in the grasp of two stalwart Indians. The mother became almost frantic at the sight.

"Let me go! I kin save him!" she screamed; but strong arms held her back from certain destruction. The Indians probably had intended to capture the boys, but the one engaged with Johnny Ryan became exasperated at his sturdy resistance, and afraid to expose himself longer as a mark for the shots from the fort, he sunk his tomahawk in the skull of the devoted boy, tore off the scalp, and left him dying on the banks of the Kanawha. The other child was taken away, and his fate never was known.

The combat then was opened. Every man was at his post, while the willing hands of the women molded bullets, and kept up the supply of ammunition, that the men might not be obliged to leave their stations. The clearing around the fort, and the little cluster of log-cabins near it, literally swarmed with a host of yelling, screeching human wolves, whose hideously painted bodies, fierce gestures, and wild cries made them seem more like demons than human beings.

An old hunter rather incautiously exposed his person at one of the loop-holes, and a musket-ball from the ever-watchful enemy shattered his right arm, and rendered him unable to do further service.

"Here! I want that ar' rifle! I've been waiting fur one!" exclaimed Mrs. Ryan to the wounded man, as he turned away from his post.

"Wal, take it! an' I hope ye'll have more sense 'n I had, an' not stick yerself up for a mark for them red devils," exclaimed the man, as he handed her his weapon.

"If I don't make some of 'em dance ter the'r own music, I'm uncommonly mistaken!" was the sharp reply, and the little woman, after procuring a large block of wood to stand upon, took the post vacated by the disabled man.

"How weary you look," remarked Bently, observing the pale cheeks and anxious countenance of Bessie, as she furnished him with a fresh supply of ammunition.

"Not more so than you. I'm afraid the men will give out if there is not some relief before night," she replied.

"Oh, no! We can hold out a long while yet;

and the recruits which have been sent for will surely be here before long," replied Bently.

"If I had but a rifle!" exclaimed the resolute girl, "I could be of some use; *any one* can mold bullets and serve out ammunition."

"There! Your last new ball has settled *one* of the varmints," said Bently, turning to her again, after discharging his piece.

Just then a shrill laugh from Kate Ryan caused Bessie to hasten to her.

"What is it, Kate?" she asked, somewhat startled and shocked at such a sound from her.

"That Injun that I hit jest now, bounded up and shook his legs in the air, like he war dancin' a jig!" returned Mrs. Ryan, again laughing. "Now I'm goin' to make another of 'em jump," and she began rapidly to reload her piece.

"Kate, let me take your place for awhile; you are getting too much excited, and will be down sick next," pleaded Bessie, but her sister-in-law would not listen to the request.

"No! I'll stand here as long as thur's an Injun in sight, or a breath of life in my body!" she answered, sharply; and realizing that it was useless to remonstrate, the young woman turned away.

As day after day passed, and no reinforcements arrived, the little garrison was compelled to endure great privations. The supply of water and provisions was so nearly exhausted as to oblige all to be put upon short allowance. Some of the less heroic women thus imprisoned and required to suffer, would complain bitterly of their hardships, when, with great sharpness, and in her own abrupt, sarcastic manner, Mrs. Ryan would exclaim:

"Look at me! Haven't I endured as much as any of ye? Do I complain? Jest quit it and go to work. Ye kin stand suffering jest as well as the hard-worked men. Don't be babies."

"The Indians are drawing off at last. We are victorious, are we not?" exclaimed Bessie, as, one morning, the savages seemed to be making preparations to raise the siege.

"We are not yet sure; but, it seems like it," replied Bently.

"Well, at least we can breathe freely once more."

"Yes. The poor wretches will have enough to do for a while to take care of their wounded and bury their dead."

At length the garrison became assured that the enemy had retired, for a time, at least. The first thing to be done was to renew the stock of provisions from the surrounding farms. A party was detailed for this purpose.

"There's a heap of provender at our house. Nothin' to do but go an' git 'em," said Kate Ryan to a group of men, who were discussing the arrangements for the expedition.

"That's uncommon lucky, by Jinks! Jist tell us whar to find 'em, an' ef the red ribs haven't got 'em, you better believe they won't stay thar long!" said Joe Sykes, with a broad grin on his rough face, as he glanced from Mrs. Ryan to Bessie. "I kin eat shoe-leather myself, I kin; but I kinder want you wimmen-folks an' children to fill up ag'in on bread an' meat."

"Tell ye whar to git 'em!" cried the indignant little woman, twitching her head round in a manner peculiar to herself. "I intend to go

after 'em myself! Ef you want to go 'long, you kin!"

"Now look here, Mrs. Ryan," protested the honest Joe, "'tain't safe fur you to go; ye'd a heap better keep inside of this fort fur a while yit, an' let us men do the outside work."

"Don't ye trouble yerself 'bout me," answered the indomitable Mrs. Ryan, turning her flashing eyes upon the speaker. "I'm a-goin', an' ye needn't borrow trouble on my account, neither. Jest git yerselves ready, an' ye won't be kept waitin' fur me!"

"Kate, I shall go too," said Bessie, quietly.

"You!" exclaimed Bently, in astonishment.

The young girl laughed, and making no other reply, followed Mrs. Ryan, who had already left the spot to begin her preparations for the expedition.

"The very lightnin's in the Ryan women!" muttered one of the group of men, as he turned away.

"Lightnin'?" exclaimed Joe. "Not a bit of it! It's cl'ar grit, as sure as yer born. Ef the wimmen says go, go it is."

At length a party, consisting of ten men and the two self-willed females, were ready for a start. A unique picture did they present, as they filed out of the fort upon the river-path: the little but lithe figure of the widow, habited in the short, wide skirt of homespun stuff, which did not interfere with convenience in riding, working, or walking, mounted in her peculiar style upon her own favorite horse, a noble gray steed of unusual sagacity; near her rode Bessie, whose gentle but fearless bearing presented a charming picture of grace and ready skill. Then the armed pioneers in their border suits, a part of them taking the lead as they entered the forest, and struck into the trail-like road which wound around River Hill, and then on, through the woods, down to the Ryan plantation.

But little conversation transpired as they rode along. The knowledge that they were still in peril induced the exercise of the greatest caution and vigilance.

Suddenly Mrs. Ryan's horse stopped.

"Get up, Selim! Get on, sir!" with a smart stroke of the whip; but the resolute Selim only tossed his head the higher, without advancing a step.

"He smells an Injun!" was Mrs. Ryan's brief comment.

"I b'lieve thur is something wrong, by Jinks!" remarked Sykes. "I'll bet an old gun that the red varmints are around. Look to yer primin', boys!"

"Some of us had better go ahead and reconnoiter, like; thur mought be an ambush t'other side of yon hill," said one of the men.

"It's ruther risky business to go ahead without findin' out fust whether thar's a trap set fur us over the hill," remarked an old hunter. "Three or four of us had better slip quietly round through the woods, and see if thar's any thing hid thar."

No one offered to start, and Mrs. Ryan exclaimed, in a sarcastic voice:

"I'll go; I'm not afeard."

A curious expression flitted over the countenances of the men at this flattering implication.

"I won't take *that*, by Jinks!" muttered Joe Sykes. "Boys, I say: half of ye stay here and guard these women, while t'other half goes ahead."

"Guard yerselves!" snapped out Mrs. Ryan, with a suddenness and fire that made those near her instinctively draw back; "I kin take keer of myself!"

"There is no need of any of you staying with us," interposed Bessie. "We are, both of us, well armed and well mounted, and can either fight or fly," she added, smiling.

Joe Sykes, taking the smile exclusively to himself, felt ready to rush at once upon any number of ambushed foes, and accordingly dismounted without further parley. The others of the party doing the same, they fastened their horses and started off, rifle in hand, to reconnoiter.

"Selim seems bewitched to-day; I don't know what ails the critter," said Kate Ryan to her sister-in-law.

"Kate, I hear music! And see! there are the men rushing up the hill from every direction. Hurrah! hurrah! the Flag!" and Bessie stood up in her stirrups to catch sight of the troops which were just coming in view over the brow of the hill.

The stirring notes of the fife, and the resounding beat of the drums vibrated through the forest, and cheer upon cheer rent the air at the long-expected reinforcement made its appearance.

Ninety-five well-armed and disciplined men, most of them accustomed to Indian warfare, were indeed a welcome addition to the defensive force of this little settlement.

CHAPTER IV.

A "REGULAR" SUITOR.

"WHO is she?"

The question was asked by a soldierly-looking fellow, one of the late recruits, as Bessie Ryan passed from the fort to one of the cabins in the little village near it.

"A beautiful girl! Do you know her?" the same speaker added.

"Know her? I reckon I do," growled the roughly-clad, hearty old frontiersman addressed, "and it's little she'd keer fur the likes of you! She don't take to new-fledged soldiers, as has never scalped a red-skin, I can tell ye!"

The young soldier regarded the old forester with a mingled expression of amusement and pique, but with the air of one whose self-confidence precluded all danger of his being hurt by insinuations of an uncomplimentary nature.

To a casual observer he was handsome, with his sparkling blue eye, dark "wavy" hair, well-proportioned figure, and of good address generally. Conscious to the fullest extent of his prepossessing appearance, he conceived himself to be a favorite with all women of taste, for whom he could only feel a gentle sympathy, where their too-impressible hearts yielded to his manifold charms. Having several times had brief glimpses of the forest beauty, he found himself becoming decidedly interested in her,

without having made her acquaintance, and without having yet even learned her name.

"Who did you say she was?" he asked again, with easy indifference to the backwoodsman's previous rebuff.

"Didn't say, as I knows on," was the cool reply.

"Does her father live in the village?"—offering a plug of tobacco to the uncommunicative man.

"Wal—much obleeged—she hain't got none, as far as I know. She's a Ryan; her brother was killed by the Injuns just afore the siege. P'raps you heerd about it?"

"Yes; then she's a sister-in-law of that queer little widow that hates the Indians so much, is she?"

"Yes; an' *she* hates 'em too; an' if you've any notion of sparkin' around *her*, ye'll hev to show yer grit, I kin tell you!"

Saying which, the old man rose from his seat upon the ground, took his gun from its place against the wall of the block-house, and strolled off toward the village.

As Bessie Ryan passed along the stockade street on her way home—for Mrs. Ryan and herself now lived in the village—she stopped at Simon Grey's cabin, to have a few moments' chat with Jessie Grey, who was a fast friend and ardent admirer, and two or three years her junior.

Concluding her chat upon other matters, Bessie made inquiry of Jessie, concerning the young soldier who had saluted her so politely, as she passed out of the fort.

"Do you know him?" she asked.

"Jessie's cheeks flushed.

"Yes; he has been here several times; his name is Wilmot—Harry Wilmot!"

"Oh! he has been here, has he!" cried Queen Bess, teasingly.

"He'll be sure to fall in love with *you*, Bess—you are so beautiful!" retorted Jessie, half sadly.

"You little goose, how silly you are! He's already head-over-ears in love with you I suspect, if he has already been here several times; and here he comes again!" added Bessie, in a lower tone.

In a moment Captain Wilmot was at the door. Of course an introduction to Miss Ryan followed. The young officer exerted himself to make a favorable impression; but Bessie maintained a dignified and formal manner, determined that Jessie Grey's apprehensions should not be realized.

Not many days after this, however, Captain Wilmot called at Mrs. Ryan's, and, being received politely, took it for granted that his visits would be welcome. So, without further ceremony, he became a frequent guest.

"I wish Captain Wilmot would 'tend to his *own* business a little better, and not come *here* quite so much!" muttered Mrs. Ryan, as the door closed upon that personage, late one evening in September. The little woman evidently was in earnest.

"I thought he helped to make it seem less lonely for you, Kate."

"Wal, I don't keer. I ain't goin' to hev

him comin' here in this way any more. *One* seech a man as Will Bently, is wuth a dozen of him!"

"I wonder what *has* become of Will. He hasn't been heard of for a long time!" said the girl, musingly.

"I reckon he wouldn't keer about comin' back at all, if he knew of all the doin's goin' on here," replied her sister-in-law, significantly.

Bessie was silent. She knew that it would be useless to contend with her eccentric relative; and, sitting down by the large open fire-place, in which glowed a pile of hickory coals, she reflected long and earnestly upon the subject which filled her heart. Will Bently's long absence, upon a hunting expedition, was to her a source of anxiety, and the persistent attentions of Captain Wilmot were beginning to be a real annoyance.

Since the arrival of the new force at the garrison, a feeling of comparative security prevailed in its immediate vicinity, and the more courageous of the women and children of the little town would sometimes venture out beyond its limits.

One beautiful day in autumn it was proposed that a party of the young people should go nutting, a short distance into the woods, scarcely out of sight of the fort. Bessie Ryan and Jessie Grey, attended by the assiduous Harry Wilmot, were of the number. Each one of the girls provided herself with a small basket of luncheon, that they might enjoy a long day's ramble, without the necessity of returning for dinner. The four or five young men of the party were well armed, and declared their intention to furnish a supply of squirrels, or some other game for dinner. A fire was to be kindled upon the banks of the little stream, which murmured along near by, over a bed of glistening pebbles.

Bessie, naturally of a poetical temperament, was in her element. The beautiful day—the swaying of the tall trees with their many-colored foliage—the bright leaves fluttering to the ground, the singing of the birds, the splashing of the dimpled water—all combined to animate her spirits to the highest degree.

She laughed, and sung, and chattered—mocking the surprised squirrel that peeped down at her from his seat upon a lofty limb; or balanced herself upon some fallen tree, that spanned the stream, giving herself up utterly to the joyousness that the surroundings inspired.

Poor Captain Wilmot at length began to look despondent, for Bessie seemed entirely oblivious to his thousand-and-one attentions; so self-satisfied and happy, as to be quite provoking.

Bessie wandered about, sometimes searching for nuts, quite as often watching the wild inhabitants of the woods, or losing herself in contemplation of the scenes around her—once in a while pausing to answer the echoing calls of her companions. Thus she had almost unconsciously strayed on, until she found herself within a natural glade by the side of a stream, where the sunshine swept down in broad gleams. She sat down upon the grass, flinging off her sun-bonnet, while she gazed up at the flakes of white cloud, stretching themselves like thin veils between earth and sky. Suddenly she felt, with an instinctive sense of danger, that some one

was near her, though she had neither seen nor heard any thing to warn her of another's presence. Glancing hastily over her shoulder, she beheld, just behind her, the painted face of a stalwart Indian.

Her first impulse, of course, was to scream; but she did not utter a cry; her second thought was to flee; but, before she could rise from the ground, the savage caught her by her arms, and quickly pinioned them behind her.

"Injun want squaw; come 'long!" he said, in broken English.

Knowing that she could not run with much swiftness with her arms bound, Bessie stood, for a moment, perfectly still, undetermined what course to pursue. Then, reflecting that her companions could not be very far away, she gathered her full strength for a scream, and gave it with a will and force that startled the tall savage by her side.

"*Big yell!* Come 'long now—mus' run," he said, taking her by the shoulder and pushing her rapidly before him into the depths of the forest.

Determined upon as much delay as possible, the captive purposely stumbled and fell to the ground.

The savage, evidently suspecting the ruse, scowled at her, and, drawing his tomahawk, exclaimed:

"Come fast; no fall again, or me kill!" and taking hold of one of the long braids of hair which had become loosened in her fall, he led her swiftly on.

Bessie saw the horse belonging to her captor tethered to a sapling at a little distance in the woods. She noticed, too, that he had left his rifle there. If once placed upon the animal before her captor, she realized that she would be past present rescue.

So, while he was untethering the animal, with a desperation that was past feeling the pain which she inflicted upon herself, she wrenched her wrists apart, lacerating the flesh, stripping much of the skin off in doing so; and whirling suddenly round, ran toward the little stream. The Indian was in pursuit in an instant. Finding that she could *run* as well as *yell*, he threw his tomahawk after her, but it whizzed harmlessly past.

On she flew, her pursuer close behind. She could hear his hard, quick breathing, and when she felt that he was about to seize hold of her again, she suddenly stooped, and the warrior pitched headlong over her, quite knocking her over also. Clutching both hands full of the soft, dry, yellow sand of the soil, she arose just as the Indian sprang forward to seize her, and, scarcely knowing what she did, hurled the sand full into his open mouth and eyes. He made a grasp at her, stopped—sputtered—danced wildly about in frantic rage for a moment, and then dashed toward the water—Bessie, meanwhile, continuing her flight. Soon she saw Captain Wilmot and another one of the young men of the party coming toward her with all possible speed. She pointed toward the stream, unable for a moment to speak, and Wilmot, seeing an Indian dodging along the banks trying to escape, rushed forward, determined to take at least *one* scalp, that he might no longer be re-

proached by the old frontiersmen, who loved to taunt him with his "freshness" and inexperience.

For a time the banks of the water-course protected the savage, who ran stooping, until he should reach the bend in the creek, where the trees and underbrush grew nearly to the water's edge, under whose protection he hoped to escape. But, Wilmot was a good marksman, if he had not practiced upon red-skins, and as the fugitive rose from his bent position to dart into the woods, the captain fired, and the savage fell to rise no more.

To obtain the scalp of his fallen foe was the next thing to be done; but, though Wilmot ardently desired to possess it, yet he could not repress a cold shudder at the thought of taking such a trophy. But, have it he must; so, after another moment's hesitation, he proceeded to the task, and, had it not been for pride's sake, he would have thrown it from him even after securing it. Noticing, a little further on, the tethered horse, he took possession of it, then hastily retraced his steps and soon overtook the whole party, which now had all gathered—every one in a state of alarm and excitement. Bessie, whose pale face showed how much she was suffering from her lacerated wrists, and overcome by the excitement she had undergone, was seated upon the captured horse, and the whole party hastened homeward.

Captain Wilmot placed himself at the bridle-rein, and, as they emerged from the woods and turned toward the village, he exclaimed in a low, agitated tone:

"Oh, Bessie! I can scarcely realize that you are safe, though I *do* realize how dear—how *very* dear you are to me. Your pale face almost breaks my heart!"

"No, no! you must not say that!" said Bessie, quickly. "I—"

"I *will* say it! You *are* dear to me; you have long known it—you *must* have known it!"

"No, Captain Wilmot; I never imagined that your heart was in the matter at all. We have been friends—we can *still* be friends, but *nothing more*," replied Bessie, in calm, decided tones.

"*More* than friends, Bessie Ryan—*more* than friends—or less. It is either *love* or *hate* with me!" he answered in suppressed tones, through his set teeth.

Bessie did not reply, but, shaking the bridle loose from his hand, she joined some others of the party, and Captain Wilmot, with a cold bow, strode off in the direction of the fort.

Quite an excitement reigned in the little village when the adventure became known. A small band of men went out to scour the woods, and ascertain whether there were Indians lurking near, but the only thing discovered was the fact that a party of red-skins, on a hunting expedition, had passed near the vicinity of the settlement. The supposition was, that one of the number while roving through the forest, by chance espied Bessie alone and unprotected, and conceiving that it would be an easy matter to secure her as a captive, had made the attempt. He lost his prize and his life; and Bessie—she won a suitor.

CHAPTER V.

A MAIDEN'S CHOICE AND A MAIDEN'S LOSS.

ABOUT two weeks after the nutting-excursion, Mrs. Ryan announced her determination to visit her late home, with a view to obtaining some useful articles which had never yet been removed. What she proposed was usually acquiesced in, for those well acquainted with her knew that opposition but added to her determination to carry her point, whatever it might be; so Bessie made no objection; and seeing her sister-in-law's preparations for the expedition, a desire to revisit the old homestead also seized her.

"Kate! I believe I will go with you; what do you say?"

"You kin do as you like, I reckon!" was the reply, which signified the widow's entire willingness that Bessie should accompany her.

"And do let *me* go, too!" exclaimed Jessie Grey, who had, according to custom, run over to spend a part of the afternoon with her friend Bessie.

"What d'ye s'pose I keer?" replied Mrs. Ryan. "But, ye'd better ask yer own folks about it, 'fore ye calkulate too much on't."

Mrs. Grey was willing that Jessie should go, but stipulated that the trip should be postponed until the next morning, and a larger party made up, which should include one or two men as a protection against danger.

Thus the matter was finally arranged, and Captain Wilmot, hearing of the proposed excursion, called at Mr. Grey's and offered himself as Jessie's escort, which added exceedingly to the anticipated pleasure of the young girl.

The following morning, the little party, consisting of Mrs. Ryan, Bessie, Jessie Grey, Captain Wilmot and Mrs. Ryan's man, Pete, set out for the plantation—the three first mounted each upon her own favorite horse, and in high spirits with the prospect which the fine day afforded.

Bessie led the way—a thing so common with her as to be expected. Captain Wilmot's manner was just the same as usual; he did not seem to remember that anything unpleasant had passed between himself and Bessie, but laughed and chatted with Mrs. Ryan and Jessie Grey, with an occasional remark to Bessie, when she chanced to linger within conversational distance.

If her calm indifference of manner signified anything to him he would not allow it to appear; and so, when they had nearly reached the farm, he left Jessie Grey to the society of her friend, Mrs. Ryan, and urged his horse on until he came alongside of Bessie, who then seemed absorbed in a fit of musing.

"A penny for your thoughts," he said, gayly, looking into her face, as though he expected what he desired—a revelation.

"I am not in the retail business!" and Bessie softened the abruptness of her reply with a faint smile.

"Perhaps you would wholesale them, then, which would suit me much better," was the return jest.

"No. I have no thoughts for you in any way," was the rejoinder.

Captain Wilmot's face flushed and paled several times before he found voice to reply:

"You have trifled with me, Bessie, and you shall repent of it. A man's heart is not a mere plaything, to be cast aside as worthless, after affording a moment's amusement!"

"I have never given you the faintest reason to suppose that I cared for you, other than as a friendly acquaintance, and I tell you now, and once for all, that I do not love you, and if you knew me as others know me, you would never give me occasion to repeat what I now have said."

Wilmot was silent for a moment; then, as they came in sight of the deserted farm-house, thinking it his best opportunity, he remarked:

"Neither do you know me, Bessie, or you would not think of *this* being the end!" and drawing in his rein a little, he allowed Bessie to precede him up the path to the house, while he rejoined Jessie Grey.

After spending an hour or two about the place, and securing such things as she had come to obtain, Mrs. Ryan signified her readiness to return to the village.

As they were winding slowly down the slope which led from the house to the river-path, an exclamation from Mrs. Ryan directed the attention of the party to a band of hunters advancing through the woods directly toward them. The tall form of Will Bently was all that Bessie cared to see, and the bright flush of pleasure mantled her cheek and glowed in her eye as they met, but there was an indescribable something in his manner toward her for which she could not account; and after the warmth and surprise of the first greeting were over, he seemed to grow strangely reserved.

"I wonder what it means?" she thought; and glancing toward him with an inquiring look upon her face, she found him regarding her intently. She smiled involuntarily, and Bently, smiling in return, came up to her as the party was about to move on.

Bessie waited for Mrs. Ryan and Jessie to pass on before; Captain Wilmot waited for Bessie; but, she showed no sign of moving from the spot. At length, as the position was becoming awkward, Bessie turned her horse's head, determined to thwart Wilmot's purpose of riding back with her; and, addressing Bently, who stood with his rifle on his shoulder, waiting to see them off, she directed his attention to the desolate appearance of the homestead, and seemed utterly oblivious to the presence of the waiting cavalier. At length she asked:

"You are going to the fort now, are you not?"

"So I intended," he replied; moving forward with her, and not attempting to conceal his amusement at the discomfiture of Captain Wilmot, who, accepting the situation, rode on to join the others of the party.

"What has kept you away so long?" inquired Bessie.

"Well," began Bently, hesitatingly, "I have not—truth told—been gone as long as you suppose."

"Indeed! You have been home, then, and

gone out again, without so much as letting us know of it, have you?"

"Not exactly. I came within a few miles of home and stopped over night with an old friend settled further up the river, and finally I resolved on a change of plan, and went out again without seeing home."

"Of course you had a reason for it, which I am not going to ask," said Bessie, half-laughing and blushing a little; "but I want to tell you one thing: when you hear stories about me, don't believe them till you *know* them to be true."

"I shall not, certainly. I may understand, then, that there is no truth in certain rumors I have heard?" and he spoke with eager earnestness, scanning her face, as she replied:

"I can, of course, only surmise what you *may* have heard; but, I can truly say there is no ground for *any* rumors concerning me."

"Bessie!"

"Will!"

There was a clasping of hands; each understood the other; there was no need of words.

Contrary to expectations, Bessie's inveterate suitor continued as bland and attentive as ever.

True, he gave her no further occasion to repeat her decision, but persistently displayed his unvarying devotion, by attaching himself to her whenever and wherever he could do so without danger, or receiving a direct rebuff, being particularly careful not to place himself in a position which would afford Miss Ryan an opportunity of administering one.

Toward his rival, Will Bently, his manner was, at first, overbearing and supercilious, but gradually became conciliating, and finally ended in direct overtures of friendship.

He volunteered his own confidence, thinking perhaps to secure Bently's; but, Will's only revelations were concerning his stirring and adventurous life in the woods, and among the savages and frontiersmen—never alluding, in the remotest manner, to the one person so dear to him. Not so, however, with Captain Wilmot; he seemed to have a special delight in dwelling upon every trifling circumstance of his association with Bessie, enlarging always upon any word or action of hers, which might be construed into an indication of interest in himself.

"I never told you, did I, Bently?" he said, one day, as the two sat before a fire in one of the block-houses, cleaning their rifles, "of that adventure of mine and Miss Ryan's, that happened last fall? Came near being a serious affair for her, I can tell you!"

"Why, no, I don't remember that I ever heard of it from you; what is it?"

"Well, of course it is something that I don't speak of to every one; it seems rather egotistical to mention it at all, and I wouldn't do it if we were not friends, and I know you take almost as much interest in the young lady as I do. Well, one day early in the fall, two or three of us went out into the woods to spend the day, and gather some nuts. Bessie wandered off by herself. I cautioned her not to go off too far, but she isn't much afraid of anything, and so

kept on until she came to a sunny spot on the banks of the creek, and there she sat down to rest, never dreaming of the danger near."

"It was very careless of you, I think, to let a young girl stray off into the woods alone, in such times as we have had!" interrupted Bently.

"Well, it was; but I kept my eyes and my ears open, and when I heard her scream, it didn't take me long to reach the spot where she was. There I saw an Indian, painted and looking like the devil himself, trying to make off with her; but, this rifle of mine soon ended his maneuvers, and Bessie had the pleasure of a ride home on the red-skin's horse."

Bently remained silent, busily engaged upon his rifle. After a few moments of silence, Captain Wilmot resumed:

"You cannot think it strange, then, that a warm-hearted girl like Miss Ryan, should have some liking for the man who saved her life!"

"No; and I heard some time ago, that you were really engaged, but the report was afterward contradicted, by what I considered good authority. How is it?" said Bently, wishing to hear what answer Wilmot would give to so direct a question.

"I don't actually say that we are engaged," said Wilmot, with emphasis; "but I do say that if any one has a chance in that quarter, I have!"

"That's a very different thing from the impression you have tried to convey," replied Bently, coolly, and shouldering his rifle, he left the fort, and struck into the road that led into the forest.

The young hunter's feelings were not as unruffled as they appeared to be. He loved the forest beauty passionately, and when he saw the handsome young soldier—even more refined and accomplished than himself—constantly besieging her with his attentions, and practicing the many little arts of pleasing of which he himself was quite incapable, he could but allow the fear to enter his heart, that, perhaps after all he should lose the love he was once so sure of winning.

He decided, however, that he would, without further delay, ask Bessie, plainly, how the matter stood—whether she loved him and would be his wife, or not.

Accordingly, early in the evening of this same day, he turned his steps toward Mrs. Ryan's house. It was after dark, but a bright light from the great blazing fire in the rude fireplace shone through the little uncurtained window. He paused a moment on the steps before knocking, his heart beating more rapidly than usual with the thought of his errand. A voice within—Bessie's voice—came to his ears.

"Captain Wilmot, you'll crush my hand!"

A light laugh from the one addressed followed this exclamation.

"Do as I say, then, and I will release it."

A silence succeeded, suggesting compliance on the part of the lady.

Bently let fall his uplifted hand, and turned to retrace his steps.

"This is scarcely just," thought he, pausing. "I will not be hasty in judging her; I will go in."

In returning toward the house, he glanced at the little window, through which the scene within was plainly apparent. Almost unconsciously he allowed himself to gaze in upon the occupants of the room. Mrs. Ryan, with her child upon her lap, sat with her back toward the two principal figures, Bessie and Wilmot. Wilmot was standing before the fire, with his back to the window holding both of Bessie's hands in his own. She stood passive, and apparently well content, with the light of the cheerful fire playing upon her beautiful features.

"If she dislikes him, really, as she has given me reason to suppose, it is impossible that *she*, with her lofty pride and womanly reserve, would permit *such* freedom. Oh, Bessie, can it be that I have been deceived in you, or you deceived in yourself?"

Saying which, in a tone that was almost a groan, Bently turned and strode away through the darkness.

In the morning he was gone. In company with some hunters and trappers, who had been tarrying in the settlement for a day or two, he had started on another expedition, telling his friends at the fort to look for him when they saw him coming—not before.

Winter passed, and still no news of Will Bently reached the little settlement around Fort Kyle. Spring advanced, with its life-renewing power, bringing fresh beauty to wild-wood and glade, but the season did not bring its accustomed gladness to Bessie Ryan. The impress of the consuming anxiety in her heart began to appear in her face, from which the snows of winter appeared to have chilled out the old rose bloom. Her eye lost much of its sparkling brightness, her laughter its silver ring, and her proud bearing its animation and independence. More and more reserved did she become toward all; and a nervous watchfulness, whenever she heard a heavy step, betrayed that she was constantly listening and waiting for a footstep that did not come.

Toward Captain Wilmot her manner was that of decided dislike, so apparent as to be an effectual preventive against any further attentions from him. Believing him to have been guilty of some underhand measure to cause estrangement between herself and Bently, she did not care to dissemble her real feelings of dislike for him.

CHAPTER VI.

GONE INDEED.

"BAD news, Bess!"

"What is it, Kate?" she asked, anxiously.

"Lightfoot is missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes; not hair or hide of him to be found no-whar."

"Stolen, of course!" said Bessie, excitedly.

"Reckon not; leastways, 'tain't likely they'd 'a' took one and left t'other. Pete found the stable-door open, when he went out thar this mornin'. I told Pete to go 'long to the field an' I'd look him up; s'posed he was round the village somewhar; but he ain't. I've been lookin' fur him fur more'n an hour."

"He's gone to the farm, of course," added the girl.

"Wal, I thought of *that*, but don't know, neither," said Mrs. Ryan.

"I'll walk out in that direction and see if I can find any trace of him," said Bessie, taking up her sun-bonnet.

"Better take the gray, an' then you won't be gone so long. Time some of them garden-seeds was in the ground. Never will be, I reckon, at this rate. Not a chick nor a child to do a hand's turn, an' us women-folks runnin' round after stray critters!" scolded the little widow, as she turned back into the house.

Noon came, and no appearance of Bessie, or the ungallant Lightfoot who had so unceremoniously walked off the night before. Sunset, and the men returned from the fields; still no Bessie Ryan. Twilight, and Mrs. Ryan, now seriously alarmed, left her house and ran over to Mr. Grey's, begging him to gather up a number of the neighbors and go in search of the absent girl.

In a short time the news of Bessie's absence was spread over the little village. All were thrown into a state of anxiety and alarm.

A party of men struck out immediately for the Ryan farm, expecting to meet her on the way unless something serious had befallen her. At the village, all waited in the most trying suspense, almost counting the moments until the return of the searching party. Not until some hours after dark did the men come in, and then they brought no tidings of the missing girl.

In the morning a number of the soldiers and several of the settlers sallied forth to renew the search. The friends of the family were vainly endeavoring to conjecture the probabilities of her whereabouts. As no one had recently seen Indians in the vicinity, the general impression was that she had become lost in the woods, where she had, or might, become the prey of some wild animal.

On the afternoon of the day after the girl's disappearance, Captain Wilmot came slowly riding into town, leading the missing horse of which she had gone in search. Until then, no one had thought of his absence. He looked haggard and very much fatigued.

He was immediately besieged by inquiries as to where he had been, and whether he knew aught of Miss Bessie. His answer was that he had seen her out in an old pasture lot, where he had accidentally encountered her; that he then first learned of her loss, and urged her to return home while he himself continued the search; that she had refused his offers and started off alone; that after she had disappeared he started for the Ryan plantation, but striking the horse's trail late in the day found the missing horse; and that in returning he had undertaken a cross-cut through the woods, and got bewildered and delayed, and had only now succeeded in finding his way home.

Several days passed. The men who had gone out in search returned, but brought no tidings of the lost one. They had found but one clew to her appearance. The cabin of a settler, situated far out in the forest, several miles away

from any other habitation, was found in ashes, among which they discovered the bones of several human beings.

It was highly probable that Indians had been the cause of their destruction; but, as the depredators had had ample time to escape before the discovery was made, it was deemed advisable that the party should return home, excepting two or three of the most experienced and hardy hunters, who would keep the trail of the Indians and discover, if possible, whether they had Bessie Ryan in their possession.

Within a week the scouts returned, and reported having followed the trail of the band of Indians supposed to have murdered the settler's family, and upon coming up with them had carefully reconnoitered the camp, and satisfied themselves that they had no captive with them.

And so poor Bessie was mourned as among the dead.

After an absence of many months Will Bently returned to the settlement which he had left so abruptly. He seemed to have changed greatly. The handsome, genial, careless Will of old had become the most reserved and unapproachable of men.

"What ails Captain Wilmot?" he asked of an acquaintance soon after his arrival. "He seems rather down in the mouth, and quite unlike the man he used to be."

"He knows what's thought of him in these parts, I reckon," was the reply.

"Well, what is that? You forget that I have been away from here for many months."

"Folks thinks as how he knows what went wrong with Bessie Ryan, if he'd only tell it."

"What do you mean?" demanded Bently, in astonishment, starting up, and advancing toward the speaker.

"Don't know what I mean! Now, Bently, you're runnin' on me. There ain't a child in this whole settlement as don't know the whole story."

"How should I know, a hundred miles away?" said Bently, with increasing agitation.

"Wal then, the long an' short of the matter is," said the old man, considerably surprised at Bently's manner, "she disappeared one day last spring and nothin's ever been seen or heard of her sence."

Bently glared at the speaker for a moment in silent consternation, then exclaimed:

"Were there no *men* in this settlement? Why has she not been found, dead or alive?"

"No use, Bently. Every thing was done as could be done. Not a glimmerin' of her could ever be found or heard of, an' lately folks have been hintin' round that Captain Wilmot knows more about it than he lets on to."

"I'll find out what he knows of the matter if I have to tear his coward's heart out!" muttered Bently to himself, as he turned toward the village and made his way directly to Mrs. Ryan's house.

The little widow was delighted to see him.

"Thank the Lord, ye're here at last!" she exclaimed. "Now there'll be some chance of findin' out somethin' about Bess!"

"I've come to you to hear the whole story," replied Bently.

With many gestures and expressions of indignation, she related the circumstances connected with the maiden's disappearance, and of the attempts made for her recovery, not sparing her censure when speaking of the want of perseverance in those engaged in looking for her, and ended her recital with an allusion to Captain Wilmot.

"Have you any reasons for supposing Wilmot could have desired to injure her? I thought they were the best of friends!" said Bently.

"Wal, they wasn't. She almost hated him, an' he swore he'd be revenged on her. They hadn't spoke together fur some time afore she was lost!" replied Mrs. Ryan.

"I don't understand it. They seemed—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Mrs. Ryan, impatiently; and with a degree of loquacity very unusual with her, she proceeded to give the full details of the state of affairs between Bessie and Wilmot, not omitting an explanation of the scene which had caused Bently's sudden departure from the village.

Wilmot had come there that evening and renewed his suit in the most impetuous and ardent manner, seemingly determined upon obtaining an encouraging reply to his proposal. Drawing his chair near to Bessie, he had seized her hand with a force that drew an exclamation of pain from her—refusing to release it, until she should say "Yes" to his suit. When she rose from her chair, the better to extricate herself, the captain possessed himself of both hands declaring he would never let them go until one was promised to him. Bessie ceased to struggle finding it useless to do so, and, after standing thus passive and silent, for a moment, she had given him one of the most decided, scornful and indignant dismissals that ever sent a suitor on his way.

The suspicion which had fallen on him, grew out of a threat of revenge he had been heard to utter against her; and the circumstance of his absence about the time of her disappearance, as well as his reappearance with her horse, served to confirm the general impression of his guilt.

The feelings of Bently, regarding Bessie, were completely revolutionized. In the place of distrust, there sprung up a stronger confidence, a warmer admiration than he ever had entertained, and he could but blame himself severely for his hasty conduct. Had he remained at home, it might never have happened, or, happening, he would have been there to trace her up and rescue her if in the world of the living.

But, something might be done even yet. Sae was not known to be dead, and there still was a chance of recovering her.

In any case, life could have no other object or interest for him, until the mystery was solved, and he had expiated his wrong to her by devotion to her memory.

Returning to the fort, he heard, as he approached the inclosure, the loud and angry tones of some one within. Passing through the gate, he found Joe Sykes standing, pistol in hand, indignantly addressing Captain Wilmot, who stood facing him with a cool composure that would hardly have been expected of him.

"Nobody but a coward and a sneak would

take that, by Jinks! Now, tell the truth, or fight—quicker!"

"What is this, Joe?" interrupted Bently.

"I vow, by Jinks! ef he *does* know any thing about that gal, I'm bound to make him tell it," said Joe, with considerable bluster.

Bently's face clouded, and turning toward Wilmot, with a glance that seemed to search him through and through, he said:

"Wilmot, this is no child's play. If you know any thing whatever concerning the fate of Bessie Ryan, have the manliness to reveal it. You either *know*, or you *do not* know. Tell the truth, whatever it is!"

Wilmot stood facing his accusers, armed as they were, but showing no disposition to accept Joe's invitation to fight.

There are times in which all the nobility in a man's nature will start up, as if from slumber, and assert itself. Whatever of soldierly qualities Wilmot possessed, he had not made much display of them. Now he turned to his interlocutor, with a calm countenance, not devoid of a tinge of melancholy, saying:

"You assail me as if I were a villain of the blackest sort. Once for all, then: I know as little concerning the loss of Bessie Ryan as yourselves. If *you* want to fight, say the word; I am ready!"

Joe looked at Bently as if waiting for orders.

"What I want in this matter," said the latter, after a moment's silence, "is to learn all that is possible of the circumstances of her disappearance."

"I was absent at the time, unfortunately for myself as well as for Bessie; and only know what I have heard from others."

Upon this, Bently turned away, closely followed by Joe Sykes, who remarked, in an undertone:

"Shows grit—don't he? I kinder thought I could skeer it out of him, ef he knowed any thing 'bout it. By Jinks! it mout be he'd do fur a sojer, after all!"

"Sykes!"

"Wal, Bently, what is it?"

"Are you ready for a tramp?"

"Ready, by Jinks! I'm on the way this minnit, if ye say so?"

"Well, I've a plan in my head," said Bently, in a thoughtful, abstracted manner.

"Hev ye? I reckon I know what 'tis, without yer tellin' me. Ye kin count on me, *sartin'!*"

"Say, then, we start this afternoon?"

"The sooner the better, fur as I'm consarned. Got grub enough jerked fur two months' rations, and feed enough for old smooth-bore, here, for a siege, and my legs jist achin' for a two hundred mile stretch."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECOND BLOW.

BESSIE RYAN, on leaving the house of her sister-in-law, hurried out to the road leading to the Ryan farm, hoping to find her horse Lightfoot, grazing along upon the new grass at the roadside. Thinking that he might have been seen by some of the inmates of the cabins in that direction, and stopping at several places to

make inquiries, she was finally told that he had been seen, not long before, leisurely making his way out to the old place.

"Very likely, then, I can overtake him, and if I get within calling distance I shall have no trouble to catch him," she said.

"Ye mou't, if ye'r' spry, Miss Bess," replied the woman of whom she received the information; "but, I'm thinkin', 'twould 'a' been a heap better ef ye'd a-took a critter yerself."

"Very true," replied Bessie, laughing: "but I am a good walker, and hope to have my own horse to ride back on; another would be just one too many."

"I know ye'r' right-down smart; but then a loose critter fillin' his mouth with fresh grass, ain't so dretful easy to come up to, ye know!"

Patting the fat cheek of the little child that had caught hold of the skirt of her dress with its chubby hands, and with a cheerful "good-morning" to the pleased mother, Bessie placed her foot on a bar which served as a gate, sprung over it with a light bound, and hurried away.

The ground was still wet with the heavy dew which had fallen the previous night, and the tracks of a horse here and there were easily distinguished for some distance, and the young woman was sure that they were those of her favorite, Lightfoot. She followed on for nearly a mile when they left the path and were lost in the beaten and trampled spot before the bars of the village pasture-field, which were partially down, as though some one had recently entered, intending to return soon.

Here was a dilemma. Could it be that she had all this time been following a wrong trail? It seemed almost certain that she had. Somewhat discouraged, she sat down for a moment upon a log, deliberating what to do, and wishing that she had taken the widow's gray, as Mrs. Ryan had advised, when a noise behind startled her. She turned round to see Captain Wilmot just inside of the gap. He evidently had been back in the pasture after his horse, which he was leading, being mounted upon another.

The situation was rather embarrassing to both, as each had avoided the other for some time; but Wilmot, with an easy nonchalance of manner that overcame all appearance of constraint, gave her a smiling "Good-morning," and inquired if Miss Ryan was "looking for the cows."

"I'm in search of Lightfoot, and followed what I supposed to be his trail as far as this," she replied, quietly.

"Those are the foot-marks of the horse I rode out here," said Wilmot. "I'm sorry they misled you. I'll make what amends I can, and go in search of Lightfoot myself, if you desire it."

"Oh, no," was the answer. "I do not wish to trouble you. I will return home now, and send Pete after him in the morning."

"Will you accept of my horse to take you home?" asked Wilmot.

"I am not tired, and prefer to walk," was the reply.

"Well, then, I shall ride on to the farm and

see if your horse is there;" and so saying, he turned his horse's head in the direction of the plantation, and after waiting a moment to see Bessie begin her homeward walk, rode away.

The road which Bessie had followed was so winding and circuitous as to make it convenient sometimes to take a short cut through the woods. A scarcely perceptible path, with an occasional "blazed" tree, marked this shorter route to the village, and it occurred to the maid that Lightfoot might have strayed into it, as it was one with which he was familiar.

Bessie was of a romantic disposition. Though eminently practical in all the concerns of everyday life; she was possessed, in a high degree, of that quality which the phrenologists designate as ideality. The grand, whispering solitude of the mighty forest inspired her with a reverential worship. Its sublimity, together with its less imposing, but scarcely less attractive minor beauties—of trembling leaf and fragile flower—of flickering sunbeam and fickle shadow—all combined to draw her thoughts away and center them on the beauties of the glorious spring day. Thus, somewhat unmindful of her steps and believing herself to be following the right path, she wandered on, until the impression suddenly struck her that she ought to be near home.

She looked around, expecting to see through some opening the clearing in which the village stood. But, nothing of the kind was to be seen; not one familiar landmark met her searching gaze. The more she tried to identify the spot, the more bewildered she became. A swift consciousness of her situation flashed upon her:—she was *lost* in the boundless woods!

"How could I have been so careless?" she exclaimed, aloud. "I seemed to be in the path. I know that only a little way back I saw a blazed tree. Yes! thank Heaven! there it is!" and with renewed confidence, she retraced her steps to the tree, expecting it to indicate the trail she had so unconsciously deserted.

"It is not the path I'm looking for, after all," she exclaimed, after examining the indications around her. "How foolish I have been! At all events there's but one thing I *can* do, and that is to follow the trail that I have struck; it must lead *somewhere*!"

Bessie hastened on, not knowing whither she went. Her situation now was truly alarming. Faint and weary with her long walk, anxious through fear of a night in the woods inhabited by beasts of prey, she began to grow heart-sick.

At length, when hope and strength both seemed about to desert her, she thought she heard the tinkle of a distant bell. She listened intently, almost ceasing to breathe lest she might lose the faint and far-away sound. All was silence, and thinking it must have been altogether in her own imagination, she was about to move on, when the lowing of cattle, unmistakably distinct, caused her heart to bound with joy. Hastening on, she soon became assured that the path she was following was nearing some habitation—for it was becoming more distinct and well-beaten, and the way-marks more frequent. Unmindful now of her

excessive fatigue she quickened her steps, and, ere long, reached a small clearing, in the midst of which stood a rude cabin of unhewn logs.

A delicate wreath of gray smoke curling up from the broad stick-chimney told her that it was inhabited.

As she drew near the door, a great, savage-looking dog commenced growling in such a ferocious and threatening manner that she paused, scarcely knowing whether to venture further or not; but, in another moment, two or three white-headed, bare-footed children came out of the cabin, and stood gazing upon her in open-mouthed wonder, when the dog, seeing *them* take the matter quietly, subsided upon his haunches and assumed a much less threatening attitude. The children soon were followed by their mother, a middle-aged, affable woman, who respectfully made way for her to enter.

Bessie took the proffered seat, fairly dropping into it, so nearly overcome with fatigue, and the reaction of her feelings, as to be unable for a few moments to command her voice. At length she explained to her wondering hostess the accident which had led her thither, and concluded by asking the woman how far it was from there to the fort.

"'Bout sixteen mile, I reckon," was the reply.

"Well, it is too late for me to return home to-day, and my friends will be in great distress. I am so sorry; if they but knew that I am safe!"

"Wal, ye'll jest have to make yerself as easy as ye kin about it. They'll be in an awful sweat, to be sure, but my man 'll take ye back to-morrer or next day, and ye'r' welcome to a sheer of all we've got here, which ain't much to brag on; but I reckon ye kin stand it *that* long, anyway."

"Oh yes! and many thanks for your kindness," replied the thankful girl.

"I reckon ye'r' purty well tuckered out," continued the woman, with a glance of sympathy at the young person so unexpectedly thrown upon her hospitality. "I'll hang the kittle over the fire right off and git ye a bite of somethin' to eat, fur I know ye'r' powerful hungry."

Bessie smiled and expressed her grateful appreciation of the kindness bestowed upon her, and the good woman bustled about with pleased alacrity, setting forth the best her scanty stores afforded; and, although the guest did ample justice to the fare provided, her hostess could hardly be satisfied that she had eaten heartily enough to make up for the long walk and the lack of a dinner.

At sundown the farmer came in from his field, and learned from his wife the circumstances of Bessie's arrival before entering the cabin.

"She comes the nearest to bein' a lady of anybody I've seen sence I come over the Ridge—an' to think of her bein' lost in the woods! I expect her folks is almost crazy 'bout it by this time!"

The rough-looking frontiersman greeted his visitor with a hearty "How d'e do?" as he came into the house, and added:

"It's mighty lucky for ye thet ye hit on the trail thet leads hyer; an' I don't know but I'll be goin' over to the settlement to-morrer, an' ef

ye're a mind ter ride behind *me*, I reckon the old critter ken take us *thet* fur. An' ef he can't carry double, I guess as how I kin foot it. It'll do me good to accommodate, in any way, any of John Ryan's kin. John an' I war friends. John war great on a scout, and the reds hated him worse'n p'izen. But they wiped him out at last, and who knows but the imps may come down on Jim Macarty's cabin?"

The hardy, sun-browned settler for a moment looked grave and thoughtful, casting his eyes instinctively upon the rifle hanging on the hook overhead. Then he added, cheerily—"But ye're welcome, an' to-morrer we'll tramp toward the fort."

"I shall be very glad to go, and I feel very thankful for your kindness," replied Bessie.

It was with a feeling of almost childish happiness, at the prospect of the morrow, that the weary girl rested her overtaken limbs upon the soft, clean bed, prepared for her in the cabin loft. The stars, which she could see glimmering through the chinks between the logs, seemed to her like guardian angels, to watch over her in her sleep.

But, after a short slumber she found herself wide awake, and quite unable to regain her lost hold upon the mantle of the gentle god of sleep. Every effort seemed but to chase it further from her, while her mind, with capricious willfulness it almost seemed, dwelt with uncommon acuteness upon every sound, however insignificant, that disturbed the silence.

As midnight drew on, the starlight became obscured, leaving her room in complete darkness. Below, she could hear the heavy breathing of the father and mother, and occasionally the nestling of the children in their bed. Lying thus, her mind was drawn from its wandering fancies by the low, savage growl of the dog outside. She started up, just as a red light, like that of a blazing torch, flashed across the room through the openings between the logs, then left all in darkness again.

Too well schooled in the signs of danger to mistake the meaning of this, she sprung from the bed, and swiftly and noiselessly hurried on her clothes, and then, with extreme caution, crept down the ladder to awaken her friends below. But she was anticipated. Almost as soon as herself were they up, and preparing for what evidently awaited them—an attack by the Indians.

"There, wife, take my knife; you kin use it if yer druv to it," said the husband in a whisper.

Bessie seized the rifle, always in readiness upon the hook. The pioneer's own weapon, prepared for such an emergency as this, was in his hands.

There were two doors, on opposite sides of the house. It was the work of a moment to turn the bed from its corner around before the door, already strongly barred, and to pile upon it the immense chest which contained the family store of spare clothing and bedding. It now remained for them to guard the remaining door and the little window beside it. Bessie stationed herself at the side of this window furthest from the door, just as a heavy blow from a tomahawk fell upon it. At once the rifle of the pioneer was leveled toward it, and

the sharp crack of his rifle was followed by a yell of agony, which assured him that one of his foes was disposed of. The next moment, a perfect shower of blows assailed the door near which they stood, and similar sounds began to be heard upon the other.

At length, before the repeated and determined assaults of the savages, the door began to give way, but as often as an Indian showed himself at the aperture made, either Bessie or the pioneer was ready to send a ball straight to the mark; and so, for a time, the bloodthirsty savages were kept at bay, but the resistance met with, and the loss they sustained, only made them the more furious, and with yells of rage and defiance they dashed at the two doors simultaneously.

In a moment the room was filled with hideously-painted figures, whose demon-like appearance well suited the work they were engaged in.

The struggle grew desperate; the settler discharged his rifle and one of the Indians fell to the floor; then, unable to reload, he struck about him with the butt end of his weapon, in a vain and desperate endeavor to protect his wife and children. The woman, armed with an ax, and surrounded by the terrified and screaming children, dealt rapid and effective blows upon those who attempted to reach her, and received, in return, numerous strokes from the tomahawks aimed at her head.

Such a contest could not last long; the shrieking children were snatched from the protection of the agonized mother, and their bleeding and mutilated bodies thrown toward her; then a hatchet, aimed from a distance, crashed through her own skull, and she sunk to the floor just in time to escape the sight of her husband's cruel death, for at length he had been overcome, and fell bleeding from a dozen wounds; and before his dying agonies had ceased, one of the inhuman brutes had torn his scalp from his head.

Bessie had not been an idle spectator of the horrid butchery. As the excited savages rushed in, bent upon destroying the principal defender of the house, they did not at once perceive her, and she had time to aim her piece at one stalwart fellow, more ferocious-looking than the others. The rifle cracked, and he fell. Of course she could no longer escape the glaring eyes around her, and she was quickly surrounded with uplifted tomahawks. She fought resolutely, beating off their weapons with her rifle, until she gained a corner. But the brave girl felt that her fate was sealed, for she almost preferred death to captivity, and was determined to fight to the last.

Suddenly one of their number made a gesture commanding those assailing her to desist; upon which they paused, and he addressed them in his own language, which, of course, Bessie did not understand; but her quick perception at once comprehended that she was to be taken prisoner. The ferocious expression of the scowling faces turned toward her, boded no good from the reprieve. A sickening horror ran through her frame as she thought of the probabilities before her, and she sunk to the floor faint and exhausted.

They left her thus awhile, until having borne out their dead, and assisted the wounded as much as possible, they prepared to leave the cabin. They then bound her arms firmly with thongs and motioned her out into the yard. Here she was left in charge of three or four of their number, while the remainder set to work to fire the house and outbuildings, and to butcher every living thing belonging to the place, excepting the settler's horse, which they reserved for their own use.

The captive scarcely dared to move, every motion she made being followed by threatening gestures from her guards. She would fain have turned her back upon the cruel sight as the eager flames mounted to the roof which had so kindly sheltered her a few hours before; but it seemed a part of their purpose to compel her to witness the scene. Hours passed thus. To poor Bessie the fire seemed to delight in lingering over its terrible work, and she almost wished that her body, too, was lying with those of her murdered friends, consuming within. Their sufferings were over; hers, she feared, were scarcely yet begun.

Realizing the hopelessness of escape from the watchful savages, of whom there seemed to be a large party, and weak from her previous fatigue as well as from the exertions and excitement of the struggle so unhappily ended, she fell into a state of passiveness which was almost a stupor.

At length the approaching dawn began to streak the eastern sky, and the savages made their final arrangements for leaving the spot. Separating into two parties, the smaller one took the prisoner and their wounded comrades, and turned toward their distant villages, while the others, taking a different course, pursued their career of plunder and massacre on the outskirts of the frontier. A wearisome journey lay before the poor young captive, alone and helpless, in the keeping of vindictive enemies.

Had it been possible, she would have left some indication of their route, but, as she was kept constantly bound, and closely guarded, there was no opportunity of dropping any shred of garment by which she might be traced. She was allowed to ride the horse, which they had taken from the stable of the settler, during the first few days of the journey; but, as they drew nearer their own region of the country, she was compelled to walk and keep pace with the long-limbed, stalwart fellows who constituted her guard.

Finally they so far relaxed their severity as to unbind her arms, and for the first time a thought of attempting to escape entered her mind. Knowing the necessity for extreme caution, she was careful not to appear any more hopeful or observant than before; yet, hour after hour, as they traveled the weary path, she studied the signs of the way, and pondered upon the plan of escape. Sure that she could not render her case a worse one, there was a possibility of bettering it; escapes such as she meditated *had* been made; why could she, too, not succeed?

All night she lay awake, watching for an opportune moment of stealing unperceived from among her guards, but their vigilance seemed

to be sleepless, and morning dawned without her having had the faintest chance of release from savage surveillance.

The next night they camped upon the banks of a small stream, in a spot comparatively clear of brush and underwood, and covered with a thick growth of soft, fine grass. This the watchful girl considered was in her favor, and she determined to make the attempt then and there. Feigning unusual fatigue and drowsiness, she laid down to rest as soon as she had partaken of the frugal supper, for she felt that her tired limbs needed rest before she began her flight. Tedious, indeed, were the hours that passed before her keen-eyed guards showed signs of slumber. The whole party lay around her in a close circle, and around the hand of one of them was strapped a deer-skin thong, which was securely knotted at the other end around one of the captive's slender wrists. Bessie knew that if she tightened the cord in the least in attempting to move, it would instantly be perceived; so, after waiting until she was certain that the whole party was sound asleep, she began slowly and cautiously to turn her body so as to bring her head upon her arm without moving that member at all. It seemed to her as though one whole hour was consumed in this; and then the sharp little teeth went to work to sever the thong. For two long hours did the determined girl persevere in her efforts before the thong gave way. Then, still holding on to it, so that in case it should be pulled upon, it might not betray her, she slowly rose to her feet. It was but a few steps to the water. Breathlessly, she crossed the narrow space, and cautiously advanced into the stream, thinking to make it more difficult for her pursuers to find her trail when they should discover her flight. The channel of the stream was not deep, but was often obstructed by tangled brush and fallen trees, so that it was sometimes difficult to find a way in the darkness.

An hour passed, and Bessie began to think that the savages would not discover her absence until morning. If they did not, she felt certain that she could evade their search and finally escape. But, suddenly, a distant yell smote her ears, and convinced her that she was missed and that the Indians were on her track. Looking anxiously around for a place of concealment, she perceived a great oak log lying near the bank of the stream, surrounded by the rubbish of broken trees, wild grass, and other drift, lodged against it by the swollen current during times of high water. At once she dashed for it as a cover, and, creeping in among the sheltering mass, she stretched herself close beside the log.

There she waited, with palpitating heart, the result. Nearer and nearer came the hurried, jabbering voices—so near, at last, that she could hear their footsteps. Were they stopping? Would they never pass by? Yes, yes! they go on; their voices die in the distance, and the imprisoned, hunted maid once more dared to breathe.

But, hark! There are others more slowly and cautiously following the trail; she shuts her eyes; she feels that she cannot escape now. In another moment a cold, rough hand passes over

her face; her mental heroism gives way, and she sinks into insensibility.

When Bessie again opened her eyes, it was daylight; she was lying upon a blanket before a camp-fire. At first the scene was incomprehensible; but, slowly and painfully, soon came the consciousness that she was again a captive, securely bound and surrounded by a redoubled watchfulness, which was cognizant of her every motion.

When the journey was resumed, it was necessary to place her on the stolen horse, her weakness being so great that she was altogether unable to walk; but she was not allowed to guide it for a moment. An Indian strode along on each side of her, and one before, holding the bridle in his hand, while the rest of the party followed close at their heels.

Bessie knew what to expect on their arrival at the Indian towns. The merciless fiends who spared neither infancy nor womanhood were not likely to show leniency to one who had cost them so dear. They knew that she had killed at least one of their warriors, and wounded others. She therefore strove to fortify her mind beforehand, to endure the insult, annoyance and torture which undoubtedly lay in store for her; she resolved to meet her fate with a firmness and calmness which should deprive the savages of half their triumph.

At the first Indian town which they reached, they were joined by a large war-party, which was on its return, and would accompany them the remainder of the way. Among them was a young brave, of commanding appearance, whose dress and bearing, as well as the deference with which he was treated by the rest, indicated his rank as chief. He seemed possessed of superior intelligence, and from his manner toward her, the captive concluded that he was, like all truly brave men, magnanimous and comparatively humane.

It was soon apparent to Bessie, as well as to those around her, that he was interested in her, and, in consequence of it, more respect was shown her, and she was permitted to go less painfully bound. Though not mingling with those immediately about her, she judged that he was informed of the full particulars of her capture, her resistance, and her attempt to escape. Contrary to expectations, and through the interference of the young chief, she was spared the painful annoyances which she had looked for, and was prepared to encounter, at the hands of the women and children of the villages through which they passed.

CHAPTER IX.

"GREAT MEDICINE."

At last their destination was reached. The returning warriors were received with loud and clamorous demonstrations both of grief and joy—grief for those who had been slain, and joy at the sight of the prisoner, upon whom they anticipated the gratification of revenging the death of their slain braves. Bessie was taken to the council-house and left there, alone, firmly bound, and with a large number of women near enough to watch the premises. They were the most watchful, because the most up-

forgiving, of her foes. A lovely woman in their power was, indeed, a feast for their hyena-like natures.

Slowly the excitement grew, until a great commotion existed in the village; almost every inhabitant, man, woman and child, was eager that the prisoner should be given up to them, that they might glut their vengeance upon her. The young chief, already introduced, Tonowa by name, addressed them with many gestures and persuasive arguments, seeking to induce them to adopt the prisoner into the tribe; but his oratory seemed to be wasted, and after some hours of hubbub and excitement, the multitude carried the day, and the captive was brought forth to witness the preparations for her torture, and to receive the taunting looks and fiendish gestures of the assembled crowd.

Women and children hastened to gather materials for building a fire. The feelings of the helpless girl can better be imagined than described, as she saw the piles of fuel heaped around a tree with a method in the arrangement that plainly signified the use for which it was intended. When all was ready, she was roughly driven toward the spot, surrounded by a perfect Babel of gibes, jeers and hootings, and, with her arms still pinioned, she was firmly bound to the tree. This, then, was to be her fate.

With a dignity and fortitude that would have done honor to any of the martyrs of history, Bessie Ryan resigned herself to the horrible execution—looking with a calm and proud indifference upon the distorted faces of her demoniacal tormentors.

But, the fire was not lighted. The principal men of the village were summoned to assemble at the council-house. There the question was reargued, and the energetic and influential Tonowa exerted all his eloquence to carry his point.

Had the captive known this, she might have dared to hope; as it was, she almost regretted the delay which prolonged the cruel suspense. It was sunset before the council broke up. Then the astonished girl found herself unbound, and taken to a wigwam, where she was provided with some supper, and a couch of skins, upon which she could repose. A strong guard was placed around her hut, and, not knowing whether to be thankful or sorry for the respite, she threw her tired body upon a pile of skins, and soon fell into a deep slumber which lasted, undisturbed, through the whole night.

Morning came, and once more Bessie was led forth; but, instead of going to the stake, as she expected, she was taken to the council-house, where the old chief of the tribe, and father to Tonowa, had assembled the chief men to await her coming. What their object could be was a matter of curiosity to her—as her face and person seemed to be to them—for they scrutinized her appearance with marked interest.

The old chief, through an interpreter, who managed to speak a little unintelligible English, addressed her in a short harangue, eulogizing the bravery of his warriors, and dilating upon the power and numbers of his tribe, and ended by asking her if she could shoot, pointing

to a rifle in the hands of one of the men. Bessie replied that she could. He then asked her if "she liked Injun?"

This question was rather more difficult to answer, but, in view of the interest at stake, she replied that she liked "*friendly Injun*." He then, with much gesticulation, made her comprehend that they intended giving her a chance for her life, as they had been informed by the Great Spirit, who had come in a dream to Tonowa, that she would become, if kept among them for twelve moons, a "great medicine"; and the wise men and warriors of the tribe had agreed to decide the matter by a test which should be considered as a proof of the truth of the dream.

The dignified bearing and queenly form of Bessie made Tonowa's stratagem—if such it was—the more easily successful, for the Indian is very susceptible to the influence of a majestic or commanding manner. The captive was to be allowed to fire at a mark set up for the purpose, at a distance of about one hundred and twenty yards from the standing-point before the council house. If she hit the mark twice out of three times, it would be taken as a favorable omen, and she would be adopted as the daughter of the old chief. If she failed, she would be consigned to the fate previously determined upon.

Bessie, with perfect calmness, indicated that she would accept the alternative; but the revulsion of feeling from the certainty of death to a prospect of life, produced a tremor of the nerves which required a strong and determined effort of her will to subdue.

By the time Tonowa entered with the rifle loaded for her use, she had very nearly recovered her accustomed animation and confidence in her powers.

As they passed out to the open ground where the trial was to be made, Bessie observed a bird pluming itself upon a tree out in the center of the village common. Directing the attention of her judges to the unconscious mark, Queen Bess took aim, and fired. The next instant the bird fluttered to the ground, lifeless. Still maintaining an unmoved countenance, the maid motioned for ammunition to reload her rifle, but the old chief, addressing those around him in a short speech which seemed to meet with approval, signified that they were satisfied, and Bessie was taken to a wigwam, where she was soon provided with a breakfast of the most delicate game which was to be procured, and furnished with such other things as were considered necessary to savage comfort.

It was hard to realize the change—a chance to rest her overweary body and mind—a hold on life again—a prospect, even though remote, of once more joining her friends. It was almost the acme of bliss. From the lowest depths of suffering and despair, she was lifted to a heaven of hope. No wonder she felt her heart swell with thankfulness and prayer.

Summer waned. There was no prospect of release for the captive, who, though a queen among them, and much beloved by the family into which she had been adopted, and whose affections she had studied to win, yet, pain-

fully, ceaselessly yearned for her home and her kindred, and for *one*, dearer than a sister or friend.

The young Tonowa, her first friend—and in fact her actual deliverer—did not fail in his admiration of the beautiful "Eye-of-Night," as he named her, in compliment to her dark and sparkling eye; but, on the contrary, as was quite natural, he had formed a devoted attachment for her—one which Bessie reciprocated as far as gratitude, and appreciation of his many noble qualities would permit. She accepted his numerous kindnesses in a manner that, while it increased the reverence he seemed to have for her as for a superior being, yet kept their relations upon a footing of mere friendship.

Returning from the chase, this young chief's proudest trophies were brought to her wigwam. The wolf-skin robe, the eagle's wing, the choicest game, anything that could minister to her pleasure, were both secretly and openly laid at her door for her acceptance. In return, she wrought beautiful moccasins, under the direction of her skillful foster-mother, who was wonderfully expert in the arts of Indian handiwork. She ornamented the robes and leggins for his wear, and made, as a mark of distinguished honor, a sash of antelope-skin, beautifully fringed with beads and gay feathers.

Bessie did not fear to trust Tonowa, believing him to be greatly under her influence, and relying upon her own tact and skill to turn his regard for her to her advantage. When he came in from his war expeditions and proudly rehearsed the scenes of his triumphs, the maiden often shuddered with ill-concealed horror; then he would add, in a gentler voice and with a softened look, in the language with which she had become somewhat familiar:

"Tonowa does not harm women and children—neither is he cruel to the long-knife brave."

Some pleasant variations came to break the monotony of the captive's life. Though there was no enjoyment in the society of the savage and uncivilized people among whom she was thrown, a perpetual feast of soul was found in the wild and sublime beauties of nature by which she was surrounded. Her love of the picturesque and grand afforded her many an hour of consolation and rest from the melancholy and homesickness that would otherwise have preyed upon her.

Sometimes she rode, accompanied by an Indian girl, sometimes by Tonowa himself, whose pride in the art of horsemanship delighted in the rivalry with which Eye-of-Night amused him. Sometimes she practiced archery, or schooled herself in the use of arms, or sat for hours upon the banks of the lonely river, dangling a hook and line, and watching the ripples go gliding and sliding past.

One glorious September afternoon, Bessie sat in a favorite nook on the river's brink, idly watching the shadows of the clouds upon the water, absorbed as usual when alone in meditations upon the future and the past.

The voice of Tonowa aroused her.

"What does the Eye-of-Night see in the water that she gazes into it so many hours?"

"She sees the faces and hears the voices of

her friends. They long to see her, and know that she yet lives," was the sad and earnest answer.

"Eye-of-Night has friends here. Why should she mourn for others that are far away?"

"Does not Tonowa's soft heart pity a young bird, lost from its nest, and pining for its mother's sheltering wings?"

"Tonowa loves to hear it sing in his own free forest."

"But its songs are those of a captive," pleaded the maid, as a tear glistened in her eye.

The young chief looked upon her with a searching, half-suspicious gaze.

"Why does Eye-of-Night speak thus?" he asked.

"Does the deer love its woodland haunts?—the silver-scaled fish its sunny stream? Does the child of the forest love the hunting-grounds of his fathers, and the white captive not pine for her distant home?" returned she, with animation.

"Has any one dared offer harm to the child of the aged chief?"

"No, Tonowa, not one. She has many friends; they are very kind to her; but she cannot forget her home and the loved ones there, who watch to see her coming."

Sadly she uttered this, and with trembling lips.

Tonowa was silent for a time, and a deep shadow rested upon his brow, while a gloomy, uncertain light flickered in his eye. At length he asked:

"Does Eye-of-Night think she will ever go from the wigwam of her father, who saved her life?"

Tears flowed from the eyes of Bessie. In her longings for home, she had forgotten the scene which this allusion recalled, and she realized at once, as it were, the uninterrupted kindness she had received from the old chief and her foster-mother.

"He is a kind father. The poor captive will never forget him!" she exclaimed.

"Then why should she leave him desolate, after staying with him many days, and break the heart that is old and weak, like a woman's?"

The maid sighed. She had, almost unconsciously to herself, cherished a hope that she would be allowed to return to her friends when an opportunity should offer; but she now realized how little realization was to crown her longings.

Tonowa resumed, in a tone of tenderness:

"Let the brave and skillful maiden dwell in the wigwam in the wilderness. She is a spirit of light, sent by the Great Father, to brighten the home of a brave warrior! Is not the fearless brave, who follows the war-path, and chases the deer and the bear in his own forest, better than the pale-face, who digs the ground like a squaw? Shall not one who is strong to smite his foe to the earth, guard the white child of his chief from danger? Let the pale maiden answer."

Bessie felt bewildered; and a thrill of fear shot through her heart, as she comprehended the meaning of his words, but she answered with calmness:

"Eye-of-Night is not afraid in the wigwam of her father, nor among her pale faced friends; the Great Spirit watches over her. She walks in thought whither she pleases; but when she walks not with those she loves, she is very sad."

"Eye-of-Night understands the meaning in Tonowa's words," he replied, looking straight into her face.

Bessie made no answer, but sat gazing into the water, and Tonowa resumed:

"The war-cry has startled the wolf from his den, and to-morrow Tonowa goes out upon the war-path, to punish the tribes of the north—the dogs of the Pottawatomies; but before he goes, he seeks a promise. He will return with the spoils of his slaughtered foes; he will come with his plumes dipped in the red blood of many victims; when he has slain a hundred of his enemies, then will not Eye-of-Night come to his wigwam and be the light of his life?"

"Tonowa," said the maiden, with an agitated countenance, "remember, Eye-of-Night speaks only the truth: Never can she live in Tonowa's wigwam. She will remain with her father, and be Tonowa's sister, and let not the fire of anger burn out the love he had for her, for Eye-of-Night wishes to be the friend of her kind brother."

"She will learn to love Tonowa; he will wait!"

"Tonowa must seek some other maiden. Eye-of-Night will not leave the wigwam of her good father."

"Let the proud maiden beware! Tonowa is strong; his heart is big; he will not be scorned." The young warrior was deeply agitated.

"Your adopted sister loves a white brave in her distant home. She may never see him again, but she will dye the green carpet of earth with her heart's blood, rather than give herself to any other. This is why she cannot live in Tonowa's wigwam."

"The maiden speaks proudly; she is worthy to mate with a great chief. Tonowa will some day seek the young white brave of her choice; his scalp shall hang at Tonowa's belt when he returns;" and without another look at the agitated girl, he stalked proudly away.

Bessie sat just where he had left her, silently pondering upon her fate, and revolving over and over again in her mind, the possibilities of an escape, while the warriors were absent upon their expedition against a hostile tribe.

At length an unpleasant odor, strange and peculiar, seemed to pervade the air, and caused her to look searchingly about her, to discover the cause. She started with sudden horror; a huge snake had drawn its repulsive body to a spot but a few feet distant, and lay with demon-like, fascinating eyes, fixed upon her. A cold chill ran over her frame; her heart beat so thickly as almost to smother her; she dared not move, but mentally calculated the chances of escape. A close thicket was behind her, but she could not hope to penetrate it with the rapidity of the reptile, which she knew belonged to a species that chased its victim. The opening on the bank extended but a short distance,

and then the thicket closed down on it to the water's edge.

Oh, for a weapon of some kind! One shot from her trusty pistol would quench the horrid gleam of those glittering eyes, but she had nothing—not even a stick or stone. She had heard of frightening the most ferocious wild animals by a sudden maneuver or terrifying yell, but it was a questionable plan in this case.

The long neck began to stretch forward, the coils to unwind. For an instant every nerve which she possessed seemed paralyzed and incapable of action; it seemed impossible to stir. Then—the snake lay writhing in its own blood. A little spiral of smoke floated away down the stream, and the reverberation of the unerring shot died out in the dusky woods.

Bessie had been in greater danger than she was aware of.

Tonowa, when he left her sitting by the river, had turned his steps toward the village, with his heart full of rage and jealousy. In the intensity of his anger and disappointment, he determined the pale-faced lover, whom he scorned, should never possess that which had been just denied to him; and entering the village, he had dispatched runners to summon his warriors, to prepare instantly for the war-path, and to meet him at a certain point down the river at sunset.

He then furnished himself with his arms and accouterments, and retraced his steps, fully resolved to slay the girl who had scorned his love, and then seek his own speedy death in battle with his foes.

But, as he stole noiselessly toward the spot, where she still sat as he had left her, and beheld her danger and her terrified helplessness, an entire revulsion of feeling came over him, and raising his rifle, which a few moments before had been devoted to her sacrifice, he aimed at and killed the huge reptile; and then without a word, or even a glance at the maiden, he hastened away in the direction of the appointed rendezvous.

CHAPTER X.

THE TWO FRIENDS.

"READY, Joe?"

"Reckon I am, Will. Two sparks in every pull of the trigger, and my rib-tickler as keen as a razor."

"Then say good-by to all."

"Not a bit of it. Whose business is it when or whar I go?"

The two men, that evening, bent their steps down the river-road, and at dark paused upon the deserted Ryan plantation.

"What do you say, Joe, to spending the night here?"

"Good idea, by Jinks! I'd jest like to nose around here whar Miss Bess used to be a-doin' pretty work. Now, don't bristle up, Bently, 'cause, ef ye do, I'm off on this tramp alone."

Bently could but laugh, and then he added, cheerily:

"No, Joe, I'm not willing to lose you, and if Miss Bessie is found, and she is not as grateful to you as to me, then I'll turn Indian."

"Here's my hand, Will Bently! I loved that gal powerful; but, Lordy me! so might a catamount love her, she was so overpowerin'! But,

she's not for the like of me—not by a river-full; an' ef you'll only jest let me help you find her—for I *know* we'll fetch her, ef we have to go to the Lake—I'll be the happiest feller in the settlements."

Joe Sykes read Bently's heart in a rough, rude way, but read it nevertheless, and it would have been hard to say how much his admiration for Will was due to the fact that he was Bessie's champion and evident choice.

Leaving Will to his thoughts, Joe scouted and nosed around, evidently in search of something. He returned, at nightfall, to find that Bently had prepared a good repast in the cabin.

"That's my contribution!" he said, flinging down upon the rough bench—a *woman's shoe*! "That's *hers*, Will, for no gal in the settlement could stand in such a toy as that but Queen Bess!"

It was a neatly-fitting but well-worn gaiter, which evidently had been thrown away as worthless, and so Will remarked.

"Then *you* don't want it, eh?" cried Joe.

"Why, what should I do with it?" asked Will.

"Do with it? Well, by Jinks, that's a pooty question! Why—why—dang it all—put it in your weskit, to be sure! You're a nice chap!—don't know what to do with that ar'? Jes' gi'n it to me, old feller!" and placing it in his "weskit," he evidently thought himself possessed of a charm.

"I found something else, Will—John Ryan's old dug-out, jest whar he left it, poor feller, afore he was wiped out. It's good as new, but full of water."

"What do you propose to do with it, Joe?"

"Why, go down-stream, to be sure. I take it that our tramp is fur the Ohio country, and the dug-out'll take us down to the traders' posts below as slick as the oil of a deer's tail."

"That's a very good idea, Joe; but, as good foresters hadn't we ought to scout along the banks, for you know the reds may be on us at any time?"

"Oh, I'll answer fur that. You shall keep the stream an' I'll cut off the bends with a scout."

It was finally so arranged; so, early on the following morning the two friends, lifting the canoe from its cover, cleaned it out nicely, and went gliding down the clear, deep river, whose swift current rendered the paddle unnecessary, save to steer. All day long they sped on, Joe Sykes occasionally landing for a scout, overland, while Will pursued the tortuous water-course around through the hills. At night they made a landing at the foot of a bluff which rose almost perpendicularly from the stream, and under its ledges found a safe retreat.

"Look out for rattlers, Will; here's jest [the place for the varmints. I hate 'em wuss'n the reds."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the sharp, metallic like *tremolo* of the real Virginia rattlesnake (*Crotalus Durissus*) caused both men to move hastily to the water's edge:

"Thar he is!" cried Joe, as he seized the paddle,

"And a monster he is," said Bently, who raised his rifle as if to shoot it.

"Hold thar! A rifle-shot mought bring something on us wuss'n rattlers."

In his excitement, Will had forgotten the danger from human foes. Joe proceeded to confront the huge snake whose slumbers they had disturbed, but stepped backward quickly, with a bound which landed him in the stream. The water being deep and the current strong, both Joe and the paddle were quickly going down the river.

Bently, pushing off the canoe, sought to follow to the rescue, but the impetus given the boat sent it too far out in the stream, and poor Joe was left floundering, ten feet away. Without a paddle, or any means of directing the canoe's course, it promised to leave Joe to his fate, and to place his companion in anything but a safe predicament.

Tossing and tumbling, Joe still was kept by the current close upon the shelving shore, where, striking a rock, he secured a foothold. His presence of mind had not deserted him, and no sooner was he safe than he turned his attention to Bently, who was fast drifting off. The paddle was seen floating close inshore, a few feet away. Joe, therefore, began to creep along the stony bank in pursuit, when full a dozen of the vicious rattlesnakes sprung up in coils in his path. With a half-suppressed howl, the now exasperated fellow flung himself into the stream, struck out boldly for the canoe, and reached it after much floundering and porpoise-like efforts in making headway.

"Don't try to pull me in, Will, or the dug-out will upset; jest try and keep her head around, while I kick her inshore."

This was easier said than done, but, at length, after puffing and splurging like a dredging machine, Joe had the infinite satisfaction of seeing his efforts crowned with success. The paddle was secured, when the two pulled on down-stream for less infested quarters.

"What do you say, Joe, to a night of it in the canoe? I'll watch and steer while you sleep."

"Skeery work, Will. It'll soon be dark as a pocket, in these hills. But, you know thar's an island somewhere below. I don't jest know how fur we've come, but it's my guess that it isn't many miles away. We'll drive ahead, and perhaps strike it before the moon goes clean out. I know thar's a but thar, and devil a snake on it; so let's put ahead."

Silently as a shadow the little craft sped on. Standing on his knees in the boat's head, while Will held the steering-paddle, Joe kept his eyes and ears on the alert for danger. Not a word was spoken, as the gloom deepened around them. The hills and giant trees shut in the stream like huge bastions, and the stars overhead twinkled as if seen through a telescope—so very far off they seemed. The minutes became so solemnly impressive that both men heartily wished for the island to heave in sight. They were not the first stout hearts that were awed by the night into a feeling of actual physical dread.

Suddenly a fire-flash came from the northern bank, then a rifle-crack broke the stillness and

a ball whizzed so closely to Joe's head as to "wind" his coon-skin cap.

"Down, Joel!" said Will, in a low tone. "There's Indians on our track. I'll head for the other shore."

"Take keer of yerself, Will, fur the red devils will bore yer ears out."

A second shot followed, but the ball went wide of the mark. It evidently was so dark that no aim could be taken, and the canoe soon reached the opposite shore in safety.

"Blast my powder, Will, but I'd rather fight the reds than land here, ef we're to meet more rattlers. There! I hear one cracking his j'int, an' my name isn't Joe Sykes."

"Hist! Are you trying to make our whereabouts known?" said Will, sternly.

"Now, look here, Will Bently; ef yer think I'm goin' to put my moccasins into rattlesnakes' jaws, ye'r mistaken. I'll see ye be durned fust, by Jinks, so I will," and with that he sat down in the canoe again.

"Who be you?" growled a gruff voice, not ten feet away, in a clump of underbrush.

"I'm a man as can lick you, any day, by Jehokey!" instantly answered Joe, as he sprung from the canoe as if shot out of it, dashing for the underbrush, before Bently fairly realized what was transpiring.

A noise of men struggling followed, and before Will could ground the canoe and effect a landing the two combatants came crashing and rolling down to the very water's edge. A knife gleamed, and Bently was just in time to arrest its stroke. Pulling Joe away, he said, in a low voice:

"Fools, do you want the reds down on us?"

Joe arose to his feet, still clasping the knife. The prostrate man did not stir.

"Have you hurt him, Joe?" asked Bently, bending over the body.

"Shouldn't wonder ef I had kind o' shortened his wind, an' I'd 'a' sp'iled his supper ef you hadn't mixed in."

The man stirred, gasped and struck out with his hands, as if in pain. Will raised him to a sitting posture.

"Guv us a drink, ole hoss!" were the first words uttered.

"Are you much hurt?" asked Bently.

"Hurt? Wal, let's see. Mebbe thar is a hole somewhar in my carkiss."

Joe here presented his coon skin cap filled with water.

"Stick yer nose in that, you old rip, an' ye'll feel better."

The stranger took a deep drink, and then arose to his feet.

"Who be you, anyhow?" he demanded.

"We are Fort Kyle men on a scout," replied Bently.

"Why in thunder didn't ye say so then, when I fust bawled out?"

"And who be you, you old night-hawk?" rather irately asked Joe.

"Wal, seein' it's *you*, I'll tell ye when I gits ready; but, by Jehosaphat, I'd rather try that tussle over again than be jabberin'. Will ye fou't me to-morrow, when we kin hev daylight fur it?"

"In course I will! I kin lick ye an' yer

daddy's two best brats, to boot, all at onc't. So now give us yer name and business."

"Yer a sassy purp, ye ar', an' I guess I won't tell ye nothin' to-night. So here goes," and he proceeded to move off up the bank.

"Shall I wing him, Will?" said Joe, seizing his rifle from the canoe.

"No, no; put down your gun. Stranger, I must insist that you tell me who you are and, as the Indians are around, we had better talk and act with caution. Who are you?"

"I'll answer you, mister, but not that other chap. I'm named Bill Bigger, an' we ar' a-trampin' up to Fort DeKane (DuQuesne,) me an' a dozen other fellers, who've been out on a long pull, an' hev had good luck, an' the other fellers are, some on 'em, on t'other side o' the river, an' I s'pects it was they as shot at yer, thinkin' ye war Injuns, an' that's the whole story."

"Blast thar powder!" ejaculated Joe; "to shoot at decent white men a-thinkin' we was Injuns! Why, Bill Bigger, yer party is drunk!"

"Not a drop o' whisky or rum in the crowd, an' *that's* the reason the boys is a-goin' in to the fort," answered Bill.

"Now, see here, Mister Bigger; you jest put yerself in this dug-out an' we'll pull over to t'other shore an' hold an inquest on yer testimony; an' ef yer wants to fight that scrimmage out in the mornin', I'm yer man."

"All right, boys! Jes' help me find my shootin'-iron, an' we're off."

After some searching, by feeling, in the brush, Bill's gun was recovered, and the three men proceeded to cross to the opposite bank—Bill being stuck up in the front, as Joe said, to take all the lead his friends might happen to *spill* out of their rifles. No accident, however, happened, and, ere long, the camp was entered. They were found to be a set of traders and trappers, bound "up-stream"—which then meant for Fort Pitt (now Pittsburg). They were heavily loaded with packs, and moved very slowly, by short stages, camping as pleasure or inclination dictated such a jolly, rollicking, hardy dozen of men as only that time and locality could produce. Just faintly perceiving the canoe, they had fired upon it, recklessly indifferent as to whether Indians or whites were in it, and regarded the whole affair as a good joke.

But, Will found in them valuable guides. Having "beat" the country for game and trade, over a wide region, they were fully informed of every thing going on in the Indian towns; and by the closest questioning, Bently obtained a faint clew to what he deemed evidence of Bessie Ryan's existence. It was but a faint clew, for such men rarely interested themselves in other matters than "business;" to know any thing in regard to captive women and children was not "in their line."

The camp did not subside into stillness until a late hour; but, with the earliest dawn, Bently was awake, ready to resume his journey.

"Yer ain't a-goin' afore I hev a chance to finish up Bill Bigger, are ye?" anxiously inquired Joe Sykes.

"Of course I am," was the answer. "Into the dug-out at once, Joe, if you want to go along with me."

"Wal, I am a-goin' with ye, as sure as I'm alive, but I want to lick Bill Bigger powerful bad!"

When the sun glinted the tree-tops on the lofty hills, the canoe was heading rapidly down the wild Kanawha, and in two days more the *voyageurs* reached the stockade, a kind of hunter's head-quarters on the Ohio, at the point known as Kenton's crossing. It was a queer place, at once a rendezvous, storehouse and fort, inhabited by two or three old frontiersmen who couldn't rest easy in the settlements. Thither headed most all bands of traders and trappers penetrating to the Cumberland country, on the south, and to the Shawnees' Muskingum towns on the west; hence it was a most favorable spot for Bently's operations. Not doubting that Bessie had been caught by the Shawnees, and borne to the west, he hoped to glean from the hunters and rangers coming, information enough to direct his steps aright.

The clew obtained from the party encountered on the Kanawha was this:—two rangers, who had been scouting toward the northwest, had told of a mighty pretty girl which they had there seen. These men were still out on their scout, and every day were looked for at the stockade; but weeks—wearry weeks—passed, and yet they did not come. Accompanied by Joe, Bently pierced the forest in many directions but dared not go too far, for fear of missing the expected rangers.

Many parties came in, but from them not a ray of hope was won. Captives were reported in several instances, but they were all from the Kentucky settlements. This delay so irritated both Will and Joe, that, one morning in September, they sallied out on a prolonged scout, to the Shawnee and Wyandot towns, leaving word at the stockade that in about a month's time they would again come in when, if no information had been left for them, they would try the Delaware country, taking all of October for the search in that direction.

CHAPTER XI.

A GLEAM AND AN ECLIPSE.

AT the settlement affairs went on very much as usual. During the summer, a band of hardy, enterprising men, with their families—some seven or eight of them—joined that advance-guard of civilization, and caused the Fort Kyle settlers to feel that, as their numbers increased, so also did their safety and their power.

The excitement which the mysterious disappearance of Bessie Ryan had occasioned subsided into a quiet, settled grief in the hearts of those to whom she was dear.

It was hardly possible not to hope and believe that she still lived; and that the sagacity and faithful perseverance of Will Bently, prompted, as they knew him to be, by an interest far beyond that which had actuated those who first sought her, would eventuate in obtaining some clew to her whereabouts, or, at the worst, in ascertaining her actual fate if she was no longer living.

Jessie Grey—like the true-hearted girl she was—never ceased to mourn for her lost friend, and never omitted an opportunity of inquiring of those hunters, passing through the settle-

ment, whose wandering lives afforded them the means of hearing of the existence of such a prisoner among the Indians, should there be one. Toward Captain Wilmot, she had, invariably, since suspicion fell upon him of having something to do with her friend's disappearance, maintained a reserve that precluded the advances he seemed disposed to make.

As time passed, Jessie could not fail to perceive a change in him, which, in spite of prejudice, went far toward restoring him to his former place in her regard. He seemed to have much less of that exalted esteem for himself which once had been so prominent an element in his character, and showed a correspondingly greater respect for the merits of others. He was, as it were, tempered by sorrow to new merit.

Had it not been for the unpleasant suspicions which still clung to him, few of his acquaintances in the settlement but would have valued him highly.

Jessie was one day standing at her father's gate, conversing with a neighbor who was just taking leave, when she saw Captain Wilmot approaching as if to address her. Hastily bidding her friend good-by, she turned to re-enter the house, but not soon enough to avoid him, for he was but a few steps from the gate, and spoke to her before she reached the door.

"Are you afraid of me, Jessie, that you run when you see me coming?" he asked, in a tone half-jesting, half-reproachful.

The pretty girl blushed, and looked very much confused for a moment, and then replied candidly:

"No, Captain Wilmot, it is not that I am afraid of you. I have other reasons, but—"

"I know your reasons," interrupted Wilmot; "but let me ask if you have been altogether just or generous in not allowing me an opportunity of vindicating myself from the charges which inconsiderate persons and spiteful enemies have made against me?"

"Perhaps not," said Jessie, thoughtfully.

"I have long wished for a chance to talk the matter over with you," he continued, "but you have constantly avoided me, and behaved as though you were convinced I was the monster rumor represented me to be."

"I have been perverse, perhaps, and will be glad to listen now to anything you can say that will clear up this mystery," said Jessie, favorably impressed by the ardor and sincerity of his manner.

"You have believed with the rest, I suppose, that I was in *some way* connected with Bessie Ryan's loss. I cannot understand how I could be thought capable of injuring one whom I always admired and respected, and, for a time, loved. It would be most unnatural to harm one we love."

"True, Captain Wilmot," said Jessie, gently, "but you had been heard to say that she should be made to suffer for trifling with you."

Wilmot started.

"Can that foolish remark have been the foundation for all this suspicion and prejudice?—an idle threat of a disappointed and vanity-wounded man! I remember that I *did* say something of the kind when I was angry and

mortified, but little thinking or meaning that I should ever do her harm. I have felt as deeply as any other person the awfulness of her fate, and would freely give all that I possess to have her brought back alive and unharmed."

"It was thought strange that you should have seen her, found her horse, and yet come home without knowing anything of her whereabouts," said Jessie, determined, now that the subject had been broached, it should be thoroughly canvassed.

"There was nothing strange about it. I have explained it before. I met her at the pasture, and learned that she had followed my horse's trail, thinking it to be that of her own. I offered her the use of my horse to go on to the Ryan plantation, but she refused it, and I then started off in search of the animal myself, and, after a long ride, got on his track, and traced him up, but got bewildered and delayed in trying to find my way out of the woods. That is positively the whole truth regarding my share of the matter."

"Why have you never joined in any of the attempts to find her?"

"One reason was, my duty here at the fort; another was, my inexperience in woodcraft. I knew I could never accomplish anything, where practical hunters and woodmen had failed."

"There is something in that; still, it would help to do away with the suspicions against you, if you should make an effort—even if you failed to accomplish anything."

"Well, Jessie, I have been thinking so myself, and have been arranging affairs so as to get a leave-of-absence for that purpose, and I hope to find those to go with me who will not make it an idle undertaking. So, if Bessie is found by my instrumentality, I shall expect to stand very high in your favor!" and Captain Wilmot looked as though he were more in earnest than in jest, in his concluding sentence.

Jessie Grey blushed, and looked pleased and happy. Captain Wilmot had convinced her, at least, that he was an innocent man.

Not very long after this, Captain Wilmot had an opportunity to put his plan into execution. A trapper came into the settlement to procure some supplies of ammunition and other necessities, and after a few days' stay was ready to start out into the wilderness again in pursuit of his business. Wilmot resolved to go with him, accompanied by two other young men who wished to make a hunting excursion, and were interested enough in his enterprise to assist him as much as possible.

They took a course different from any that had been pursued before, passing through the forests bordering upon the Ohio river, intending, if their efforts failed in that direction, to strike northward toward the Delaware towns, where Wilmot conceived that she was, if alive, held prisoner. Their plan was, if she should be heard from, to endeavor, through some friendly Indian or privileged trader, to secure her release by the offer of a large ransom, and if that was refused to give her a clew to their designs, and assist her to escape.

They had been upon the tramp for several days, when an agreeable episode occurred to re-

lieve the monotony of their journey. One evening, as they were about camping for the night, they heard voices not far distant, as of men in animated conversation. After listening carefully, and taking the necessary precautions against danger, they cautiously approached the point from which the voices seemed to come, and soon discovered a group of white men, gathered around a camp-fire, and engaged in various ways, but all in the most cheerful spirits—laughing, talking, and smoking. Like the camp upon which Will Bently and Joe Sykes had stumbled on the Kanawha, these were trappers making their way home with the products of a successful trip, and when joined by the other party, seemed determined to make a jolly time of it. So jokes, gossip and story-telling kept the whole party awake until a late hour, while the indispensable bottle went an occasional round. The rough old hunters cast many inquisitive glances at the young soldier, whose manners and language were so unlike their own, and at last one of them, less backward than the rest, said:

"Pears like you don't b'long in these parts. Come from over the mountains, I reckon."

"I belong wherever chance happens to put me down," replied Wilmot, laughing.

"Wal, thet's purty much our fix. We're hur, an' thar, an' ev'rywhar luck favors us; but I reckon ye foller somethin' else besides huntin' er trappin', don't yer?"

"My business, just now," replied Wilmot, not unwilling to be communicative on the subject, "is neither to hunt bear nor to trap beaver; but I am on a hunt, nevertheless. Have any of you chanced to see or hear of a young white girl among the tribes in the regions you have been through? Perhaps you heard of the occurrence at Fort Kyle last spring?"

The trapper knit his brows and shook the ashes from his pipe.

"Pears like I hev. Hello, Jim!" calling to another of the party who sat cross-legged on the ground, with his back propped against a huge tree, upon the opposite side of the fire. "Didn't I hear ye a-sayin' thut thur was a mighty purty white gal up yonder among the Delawares?"

"Wal, now, yer mou't 'a' heerd me speakin' on't. S'posin' I did now," he continued, getting up and crossing over to where the first speaker sat, and addressing himself to Wilmot. "Is she any akin to you, cap'n?"

"If she is the one I am looking for, she is a friend of mine, and was one of the finest girls of the settlement," replied Wilmot.

"Oh-ho! thar's whar the wind lays, is it? Wal, I s'pose thur all nice gals at the settlement," and here he chuckled at his own wit. "I've heern of heaps of nice gals, an' seen some on 'em, too; but somehow 'nuther they never none on 'em seemed to take a shine to my old hide. Mou't be kase I never hankered arter 'em much myself."

"But where—in what tribe—did you see this girl?" asked Wilmot, impatiently.

"I never said, as I knows on, that I'd seen ary gal," replied the tantalizing trapper. "'Bout six months ago, I come acrost some comerades as had bin down the river a good piece on a

trappin' spree—an' they was a-talkin' 'bout some gal they'd see'd one day, kinder by accerdent, as they war slippin' round kinder sly—fur them Injuns down thar's mighty sharp arter white men's skalps, an' they wusn't quite ready to part with theyrn yit; an' so they steered clear of her, tho' they wus mighty cur'us to know how she come thar; an' they said she wus a powerful purty cretur' to look at."

"Then you know nothing definite about it?" said Wilmot, greatly disappointed.

"See hyar, capt'in," spoke up a tall, raw-boned fellow, who had been listening with great interest, and puffing vast clouds of smoke from his short-stemmed pipe at the same time. "I b'lieve I kin tell yer somethin' 'bout that ar' myself. Thar's a gal not more'n two hundred miles from hyar, and lives 'mong the Delawares—an' I reckon she's the 'dential one yur been talkin' 'bout."

"What would you take, comrade, to guide a party of us to the place?" asked Wilmot, now quite elated with hope.

"Couldn't do it, nohow, stranger. No offense, but I've other fish to fry jist now; hain't seen my old woman an' the young-uns fur better'n a year, an' I'm on the home-tramp now with a good pile of plunder, an' the devil himself couldn't stop me."

The men all laughed, the speaker himself joining in.

"I'll tell ye what 'tis," added another of the party, after a moment's silence, seeing the perplexed expression on Wilmot's face, "I've a notion that thur's another party out on this same hunt. I see'd a young feller called Bill Bently not long ago, an' he'd jest been out on a long tramp intew the western Injun country, lookin' a'ter a gal, some relation of his'n, I reckon," with a sharp look all round, and a strong emphasis on the pronoun—"an' he was goin' to start out ag'in 'fore long. 'Spect ef ye'll be spry ye would come up to him 'fore he gits started."

"I am well acquainted with Bently," said Wilmot, "and nothing would suit me better than to join company with him; but, as he had been gone so long without our having heard anything of him, we concluded to start out ourselves and see what we could do. I'm glad to hear that he's alive and well. Can you tell me where to find him?"

"Wal," said the trapper, reflectively, "when I see'd him he war makin' tracks fur a p'int 'bout forty mile funder down the river, an' I expects ye'll find out all 'bout him at the stockade below the Kanawha, on the Ohio."

It was with the greatest difficulty that Captain Wilmot could compose his mind sufficiently to sleep that night. The suspicion which had fallen upon him had been felt more keenly than was allowed to appear, and he had determined that Bessie Ryan should be found, or her fate ascertained, if the thing was within the range of human possibilities.

He knew, too, that Bently was a thousand times more likely to succeed in such an undertaking than himself, and he determined to join him, and put himself and his party under that leadership.

Accordingly, early next morning, the little

band turned its course southward, and after a steady two-days' tramp, they reached the point mentioned by the trapper.

Here they heard of Bently, and his friend and companion, Joe Sykes. They were then on a scout to the south, but were expected at the point in a few days to complete their arrangements for a protracted excursion into the vast forest stretching northward.

Somewhat sooner than was expected, they made their appearance.

The meeting between the two men, Bently and Wilmot, was somewhat constrained. Wilmot extended his hand, and Bently took it, but in a way that showed a great lack of cordiality. He was, in fact, half-inclined to sympathize with the inveterate Joe Sykes, who scowled gruffly, and kept his hands in his pockets; but, upon second thought, it occurred to him that Wilmot might be the bearer of good news from the fort.

So, addressing him in a more friendly manner, he inquired after the friends at the fort, hardly daring to ask the question uppermost in his mind.

"Let us walk down by the river," proposed Wilmot, to which Bently assented.

"I presume you already have conjectured my object in meeting you?" he continued, as they walked slowly away.

Bently looked into his face with a searching gaze.

"It can't be that—our friend—Bessie Ryan, has got home?" he asked.

"No—not that; but I have come to join you in your search for her. I could not remain at the fort any longer with such suspicions against me."

Bently looked perplexed, and uncertain what to say for a moment, and then replied:

"Let bygones be bygones, then. Since our object is the same, we will join hands to carry it out, though I confess that, thus far, I have met with nothing but failure."

"Perhaps I can give you a clew to follow," said Wilmot. "I have heard of a white girl among the Delawares, and I can't help thinking it's Bessie herself;" and he went on to impart the meager information he had gleaned from the trappers.

"That's the best news yet!" exclaimed Bently, with more enthusiasm than he had betrayed for many months. "If it is indeed she, we will have her before another month passes away."

"Thick as mush, by Jinks! I'd 'a' thought of a fight sooner'n this!" exclaimed the loud voice of Joe Sykes just behind them, and he sauntered up to the spot.

"Good news, Joe!" exclaimed Bently, with considerable animation. "Wilmot has heard of a girl among the Delawares, and we're almost certain that it's Bessie. Do you think we can find her?"

"I reckon we kin, an' ef thar's fire in flint we'll have her in less'n a month. Ef yer sure yer on the right scent, go ahead; but I'm gittin' so jubous about these trappers' yarns that I hain't much belief in 'em."

"I have faith in this report, Joe. We'll make arrangements for an immediate start. Wilmot and his men will join us."

"Hooray fur him! Say we jine hands, cap-t'in, an' forgit old grudges. Reckon you hain't no 'bjections to shakin' my paw."

Captain Wilmot responded cordially, perfectly willing to be on terms of friendship with his rough companion, whose zeal on Bessie's behalf could but command his respect.

"Man proposes, and God disposes." Waiting for a few days for a scout to come in who was very familiar with the Delaware towns, and could speak the Delaware tongue, the party was astounded by the scout's arrival, bearing the news that the Delawares were even then on his track, on the war-path in heavy force; and before twenty-four hours had passed, the woods around the stockade fairly swarmed with the fierce foe.

Bently waited several weeks, hoping for a change in the aspect of affairs, and thinking that a battle, which seemed to be imminent, might alter the situation so as to enable them to proceed. But, week after week the danger to the whites increased—so much so that it became necessary to collect all the available force to be had, to keep off the plundering, murdering hordes that swarmed in on every side, of Shawnees and Delawares combined. Never backward where his strong arm and brave heart were needed for deeds of courage, Bently and those who were with him—Wilmot having been required to return to the fort—joined the body of defenders.

A bloody battle—long and desperate—finally occurred, in which many lives were lost on both sides; but the Indians were completely defeated and disheartened, and compelled to retire, leaving their dead, and those most severely wounded, upon the ground. It was a battle in which Bently distinguished himself among those who were neither weak nor cowardly. He felt that he owed them a double retribution, and throwing all the energy of his soul into the bloody work, he fought with a reckless daring that enraged while it baffled his desperate foes, who made him a special mark.

It was hardly to be expected that one so prominent in the fight should escape unharmed; nor did he. When the lengthening shadows of the afternoon, and the failing energies of the enemy, caused a diminution of the struggle, he became aware that he was losing strength by the flow of blood, and when the tide had fully turned, he sunk exhausted and faint to the ground, suffering from a severe wound in his side.

He was carried back to the bravely-defended block-house on the banks of the river, where, under the rough but loving attentions of the brave Joe Sykes, he was cared for in the best manner which the limited resources of the place permitted. But, weeks of helplessness—perhaps months—must elapse before he could resume his enterprise—if, indeed, he survived the effects at all.

CHAPTER XII.

RANSOMED AND LOST.

A GLORIOUS autumn sun enriched the beauty of the wild but placid scene. Its mellow, glimmering, liquid gold shone through a purple haze so ethereal that it just faintly tinted the bright flood under it, and gave a look of enchantment to the Indian village

nestled in the glade, around which the many-hued forest circled on every side but the one toward the water.

A dreamy stillness pervaded the air. All things seemed sunk into a soft repose, and Bessie Ryan, as she sat at her wigwam door, employing her hands with some bead-embroidery, and breathing the balmy air, gave herself up to visions of the future.

Ever since her adoption into the tribe, Bessie had been the recipient of every favor and mark of kindness, which the hearts of her really loving friends could devise. She had a lodge of her own, constructed with much more care than was usual to any save that of a chief.

Her own dress was adorned with the most fanciful embroidery, and the little deer-skin moccasin bore the image of wild blue violets and white lilies. With her graceful head-dress of royal eagle-feathers, she looked a very Forest Queen as she moved among the women of the tribe, and as the chosen daughter of their oldest and most influential chief, she was loved and honored.

Bessie was not unconscious of her power, but while with patient exertion she strove to reciprocate the kindness bestowed upon her, her heart overflowed with yearnings for home and friends.

As the time wore away, another trouble cast its shadow across her path. It was well known to the old chieftain that Tonowa had left her in disappointment and anger. He had said nothing to her upon the subject as yet, but, that it was on his mind, was evident from the signs of displeasure which were but imperfectly concealed, when any allusion was made before her to the absent warrior.

Bessie wisely avoided, as far as possible, all approaches to the delicate subject, trusting to time to help her out of the difficulty.

But, the day came when it could no longer be put away. She was sitting in her wigwam door, on the beautiful autumn day, when the light step of an Indian girl broke up her reverie.

"Our father waits in his wigwam for the coming of his pale-faced daughter; he would speak to her."

Bessie turned to the messenger with a look of troubled inquiry.

"Is our father not well?" she asked.

"He is well," was the brief reply.

Bessie felt a sinking of the heart—a foreboding of that she had so long feared; but, obedient as usual, she left her lodge and crossed the space which lay between the wigwams, and in a moment found herself in the old chieftain's presence. He sat upon a wolf-skin, spread out upon the ground, smoking his pipe. On seeing her enter, he silently motioned her to a similar seat near him. Bessie as silently obeyed. He finished his pipe with perfect composure and laid it aside before speaking—the visitor, meantime, preparing for what was to come.

"The cheeks of my white daughter are pale to-day. Why has the sunshine gone out of her face?"

"She has been grieving for the summer that is dying on the hillsides," she replied, with a sad smile.

"It will come again, after the snow-moons have passed over."

"True, father; but when will the sun so shine that no shadows will fall to darken the way?"

"Why seek the shadows? Is Eye-of-Night no longer happy?"

Bessie was startled by the sternness of his tone and the sharp glance of his keen eye. For a moment she drooped her head, then she murmured:

"Let not my noble father, whose kindness has won the heart of the stranger in his household, think I forget the debt I owe him; but, is it wrong that, when I am happy in my new home, I should remember those who sorrow for me?—who know not that I live, and that I have friends, and am beloved by the aged and honored chief, my father?"

"Let the pale maiden forget the past. The young eaglet makes her eyrie where a noble mate, with keen eye and strong wings, shall come and fold his pinions by her side. Does my daughter listen?"

"She listens. But, the white maiden is no eaglet." Then, seeing the darkening passion in the old man's eye, she continued hastily: "She is but a robin—a young robin, that has found a nest with old ones, and she wishes not to leave it; there is no other like it in all the woods."

The old man shook his head, but his countenance became less stern, and Bessie determined to follow up the advantage she had gained.

"She will nestle here, safe from the swooping hawk and fierce birds of prey, singing and cheering the parent birds that took her under their sheltering wings. Shall it not be so?"

The old chief seemed much pleased at the inferential argument used; but his purpose was not to be so easily set aside, and he replied:

"The old birds cannot live forever; when they depart they will not want their birdling left alone. Let the proud Eye-of-Night take the noble mate who seeks her for his own wigwam. He is brave! no voice rings out the war-whoop so clearly; his foes flee before him and dread to hear his name. Yet is his heart soft and tender for those he loves."

"He has gone on the war-path; he may never return," said Bessie, not knowing what else to say.

"His eye is quick as that of the circling hawk; his foot is like the spring wind. He will not be harmed."

"When will he return?"

"Before the horns of the moon are full. Then will he build his wigwam, and come to the old chief for his pale-faced squaw."

Bessie bowed her head upon her hands and shuddered. A long silence followed. She was almost afraid to encounter the old man's gaze after this exhibition of feeling. He waited, with the imperturbable calmness of his people, until she appeared composed, and then, with a tone so firm that it was almost stern, he said:

"Not many moons ago, when the red-men came back to their wives and their little ones, they came without many braves, whose blood had been poured out by the long-knives. Their wives wailed and tore their hair, and cried for vengeance. The returning braves brought with them a prisoner—one of the hated race, and all cried for vengeance. Then the pale captive was bound to the fiery stake—who could save her? Who pitied her? Who, in the angry council, spoke the word of life?"

He paused, never moving his eyes from the face of the girl who sat, with pale, firmly-set, impressive countenance, listening to his speech.

"The soft fur was laid for her bed; the sore and weary feet covered with fur-lined moccasins; the young fawn slain for her food. More: an aged warrior, whose head was white with the snows of many winters—took her to his heart and loved and watched over her. Does the captive live? Is the light of the sun lovely to her eyes? Speak, maiden! Say if the warm heart loves to beat?"

Bessie remained silent for a brief period, every instant of which increased the light in her eye and the color on her cheek, and then spoke:

"Why was the white girl torn from her friends? Had ever her hand injured so much as a hair of the heads of one of your people? She fought in self-defense; would you have had her bow her neck to the stroke? Yet was it most noble in the aged chief to stretch his hand and save her. Never has she forgotten—never *can* she, while her heart beats—the kindness of her father and those who cared for her when weary and exhausted and in trouble. She loves her Indian friends; her heart clings to them; and yet she yearns to be with her kindred, and hear her own tongue, and be with the companions of her youthful sports."

The countenance of the old chief remained immovable, and after a moment of silence he motioned her away, and said:

"Let my daughter return to her wigwam and rest."

Bessie left his presence with a sad heart. The crisis she had been looking for and dreading so long

was close at hand. All the dark forebodings of her first captivity rose up before her. A mood of desperation settled upon her; a deep resolve to risk all, and make an effort which should end in success or death, to reach her kindred. But, it was necessary that she should preserve her usual bearing of calm cheerfulness, and so she forced herself to laugh and chat and join in the amusements of her companions, as though nothing of change was in her thoughts.

One day an unusual stir among the inhabitants of the village caused her to step out and to ascertain the cause. It proved to be the arrival of some traders with whom the tribe was on terms of friendliness. The spirits of the captive rose with a bound; had Providence ordered this means of her delivery?

Dispatch and caution were necessary to turn this chance—if chance it was—to her account. When she came to face the great difficulty in her way, her heart almost misgave her; but, now or never, she thought, and rallied all the resolution of her nature to accomplish her purpose.

Assuming an appearance of great interest in the collection of beads and other trinkets which were displayed to the crowd of eager women and children, she adroitly succeeded in exchanging a few words with one of the traders, whose open kindly countenance seemed to assure her of his sympathy in her behalf.

"Let us seem to approach the tent of the chief," she said, with feigned carelessness, and at the same time pointing toward it.

"I understand," said he, in the same careless manner; "be brief and to the p'int in what yev' got to say. Sharp eyes and ears are all around us"—holding up a string of beads for her inspection, as though that were the subject of their conversation.

Bessie again pointed toward the tent of the old chief, and the trader, telling his companions to stay where they were and conclude their bargains, took up his own package, and, with the white girl close beside him, moved toward the tent.

"I am a prisoner here—adopted into the tribe. I wish to escape—I *will* escape, if it be through the gates of death. Or for a ransom—any thing that will be accepted. My friends will see that you suffer no loss. My name is Bessie Ryan; my home was near Fort Kyle. If I am not rescued now it will soon be too late; they are determined to compel me to marry one of the tribe."

"Leave this to me, young gal. I'll do all I kin fur ye. I've gals of my own to home. Go back to yer companions, and act jist ez if thar wa'n't nothin' the matter."

After again making gestures as if communicating some information in relation to the village, Bessie turned and rejoined the groups around the other traders, and seemed as much interested in their acquisitions as they themselves were.

The day wore on; noon came and went, and she heard nothing of the success of her friend.

At last she received a message, requiring her presence at the wigwam of her adopted father. With palpitating heart, she obeyed the summons, appearing before him with an anxious expression of countenance, that no effort could conceal. By the unusual sternness of the old chief's manner, she knew that a storm was gathering. The trader who had interceded for her stood with a perplexed face, and when she entered, the old chieftain looked from one to the other in silence. At last he spoke, measuring his tones with the cold stoicism of the proud old warrior he was.

"Let the white maiden speak her wish."

From an ashy paleness, the face of Bessie flushed crimson; but her voice and eye were steady as she replied:

"My father, I would fain look upon the faces of my white kindred!"

"Ungrateful!"

He uttered the one word with a look and tone of scathing scorn, expressing much more than language could convey.

"Have I fostered a snake in my bosom, that it turns upon me?"

Bessie gazed unflinchingly at him, but remained silent, feeling the uselessness of words to appease him.

"Better the red tongues of fire had licked up her blood than that I should have sheltered her!" continued the excited old man.

A new expression came into the face of the captive. With a proud, majestic mien, and in a touchingly impressive manner, but without a word, she stooped to lift a tomahawk that lay upon the ground near her, and silently offering it to the old chief, bent her head to receive a blow.

When she lifted her eyes, it was to see the old man's face working, as though he himself had been struck; the muscles of his strong lips were quivering with inward emotion.

"You love me no longer. Go," he said, at length.

"Oh, my father!" cried Bessie, in a transport of joy, "may I indeed go? Then never, never, will the white child of the aged chief forget his goodness. She will ask the Great Spirit, every day, to take care of him, and pour the dews of joy upon his heart as long as life lasts!"

He gave her one look, as though asking himself if he could part with her; then silently motioned her away.

The ground appeared a footing of air, so light seemed her feet, as she passed to her own tent. So happy was she that not a thought of disappointment shadowed the brightness of the hours that followed.

She knew that the business was not yet settled—that it must receive the sanction of the council; but the old chieftain's consent was a warrant for her deliverance.

On the day following, she was informed by her friend, the trader, that with great difficulty, and only by the most extravagant offers, he had obtained her ransom; and, as it was not impossible that they might change their minds, he deemed it advisable to hasten their departure.

Bessie was overjoyed; it seemed almost too good to be true. In a very short time she was ready to leave, and but awaited the movements of the traders. The old chief refused utterly to see her or bid her good-by.

But a trying scene awaited her. When it became known throughout the village that the captive was to be taken from them, the astonishment and grief knew no bounds. The women and children gathered around her with every demonstration of grief and love, kissing her hands, embracing her, and even clinging to her garments—their tearful faces and earnest voices attesting their affection for her.

Finally, she tore herself away; and taking a farewell view of the picturesque scene she was leaving, turned her horse's head toward the mighty wilderness, in which the little cavalcade soon disappeared.

But, "who knoweth what the morrow may bring forth?"

Scarcely had the red disk of the evening sun sunk below the forest line, when an Indian runner entered the village which our little party had so lately left, bearing news of a terrible battle and disastrous defeat on the border of the white settlements.

In a short time all was confusion; the women bewailed those killed and wounded, and the warriors were loud in their threats of vengeance on the slayers of their brethren. The runner informed them of the approach of the main body of warriors, and then passed on to convey the intelligence to the villages beyond.

It chanced that the messenger passed the party which had just left, giving the briefest and most unsatisfactory replies to the inquiries of the traders. Enough was understood, however, to reveal the true state of the case.

At first, Bessie felt fervently thankful that she had escaped before Tonowa's return, but in another moment, she realized, with a thrill of alarm, the short distance which separated them, and the likelihood of his attempting her recapture.

A consultation was at once held, the traders comprehending the danger to their fair charge. It was thought best, as they were liable at any time to meet the returning band, to vary from their direct course, and by making a circuit, strike the trail again after all danger was over. But, the deepening gloom prevented their acting upon the proposed plan before morning, and they prepared to camp for the night, feeling comparatively at ease in the knowledge that the Indian party would do the same. They selected a spot some distance from the path, where they would be screened from observation by a steep ridge, running for some ways along the country. Here they built their fire and prepared the primitive supper, after which they disposed themselves to sleep.

A thicket of underbrush was growing upon the almost vertical side of the ridge, in which was a recess so easy and convenient, that it seemed as if made for a sleeping-place. It served well, also, for a place of concealment; and the traders, after spreading some blankets for the comfort of their charge, advised her, if anything should happen during the night, to lie perfectly still and not discover herself. Then they extinguished the camp-fire.

A night in the boundless wilderness; the dearest interests of life at stake; before her the beloved home and friends toward which her heart was yearning; behind her captivity and a fate more intolerable than death; or, to avoid that, death inflicted upon herself.

A break in the tremulous curtain before her showed her one bright, twinkling star. Never did star glisten with such radiance before; and mentally communing with it, she could but promise that it should shine upon her once again, in her distant home. But, at last the star grew dim, the soft rustling of the leafy curtain ceased, and the maiden slept the sleep of exhausted strength.

Gray dawn was struggling through the dense foliage surrounding her, when she awoke. Then, it was not suddenly, but it was as if some strange charm drew her back to consciousness, she slowly opened her eyes—opened them upon a pair of black, glittering orbs gazing into her own with a fascinating power that thrilled her with a strange, indescribable emotion.

It was Tonowa, sitting beside, and watching her repose.

She would have sprung to her feet, but he extended his powerful arm over her, with the purpose, as it seemed, of making her feel that she was wholly in his power.

Bessie sunk back, dismayed and faint. He kept his steady gaze upon her until she was glad to turn her head, but not a word was uttered. He placed his rifle before the passage, like a bar, and then looked back at her with the faintest glimmer of a smile in his softened gaze.

She rose, folded her blankets and sat down upon them, clasped her hands, and fixed her eyes absently upon a point in the distance. Her attitude, together with the resolute contraction of brow and lips, showed that she waited for Tonowa to speak. A marked change came over his features. As he spoke Bessie looked at him in the increasing light, and was struck by the sharp lines of pain and suffering that had been drawn upon his face since she last saw him.

Involuntarily pity took the place of her former feelings, as he said, in a gentle voice:

"Tonowa knows why the white maiden is here."

He paused a moment, but Bessie made no answer, and he continued:

"Did the fleet fawn think to escape the red hunter? Look out; a hundred braves stand where your comrades slept."

"My friends! Are they gone?" gasped the poor girl, with a low cry of despair.

"They have left the maiden they foolishly thought to bear away," replied Tonowa.

"Dastards!" cried Bessie.

"A handful of pale-faces to a hundred braves! Tonowa spurns their ransom. What was that, that it should purchase the beautiful Eye-of-Night, that is to shine on him while he lives?"

"Tonowa knows—he has been told—that Eye-of-Night will never be his," replied Bessie, in a low voice.

"When she finds that she never can return to the home of her fathers—when she hears that the white warrior she pines for has gone to the land of the Great Spirit, then she will be content to dwell in Tonowa's wigwam."

She remained silent. It was useless to argue—useless to threaten, and it seemed equally vain to plead.

An Indian brought the pony which she had ridden the day before, near the foot of the ridge. Tonowa motioned her to mount it, and in a few minutes more she was on her way back to the village which she had left so joyfully the day before.

The traders, finding themselves completely in the power of the party of warriors, who had discovered their camp so early in the morning, thought it best for all parties that Bessie should be left in their hands, fearing for her life, as well as their own, if they resisted, and had, accordingly, taken their departure at break of day, without awakening her, or informing her of the misfortune which had befallen.

The poor captive was taken to the wigwam which she had formerly occupied, where she was left in charge of an Indian woman, and though she was treated with accustomed kindness she was watched with a vigilance that precluded every possibility of escape, if she had meditated it.

CHAPTER XIII.

THAT SWEET AIR AGAIN.

"WHAT a glorious sunset!" exclaimed Will Bently, as he lay restlessly upon his rude couch in the block-house, upon the banks of the Ohio river, and looked out through the little window upon the broad stream, from which the hues of a November sunset flashed back in a thousand quivering lances, while the gorgeous coloring of the frosted foliage of the forest, lent an additional splendor to the autumn scene.

"I can't stand it any longer! Joe, bring me a blanket; I'm going to walk down to the river-side."

"Ye'd better be keerful, yit awhile, Bently!" remonstrated Joe, at the same time complying with his wish, but saying, as he handed him the blanket: "One tech of the chilly air might fix ye everlastin'ly!"

"Never fear; a taste of fresh air is good for a fellow. I can't stay cooped up here forever!" saying which he wrapped himself in the blanket and slowly and feebly made his way out. Seating himself upon a partially decayed stump, he contemplated the scene about him with that relish that only the convalescent can experience after the confinement of a long and painful illness. As the dews began to fall, and the air to grow more chill, Bently reluctantly prepared to return to the stockade, when a strangely sweet and heavenly melody was heard, so faint and soft as to make him uncertain whether or not he was the victim of a hallucination. He listened intently. Again the music arose, clearer than before, and while he strained his ears to catch the sound, a rush of precious memories brought back some dim, half-forgotten happiness of long ago, he could scarcely tell what; but as the last strain floated away over the placid waters, and died out in the woody vistas around, the forgotten strain burst clear and strong upon his mind as identical with the melody he had just heard:

"Draw me still, beloved to thee!"

A thrill of undefinable emotion—a mingling of joy and pain—stirred the deepest fountains of his soul, and a longing toward the past, with a painful thought of the future, swept over him. He stepped to the water's edge and gazed as far as he could see down the river, to discover the source of the mysterious music, and continued to watch and listen till the falling of night warned him to return to the house.

The next morning his faithful attendant, Joe Sykes, entered the room, with a peculiar expression upon his features, which, over and anon, defied his efforts at control. The willful muscles of his mouth would perversely draw his lips apart in unaccountable smiles. At length Bently, who had been so preoccupied with his own thoughts as not to notice the peculiarity of Joe's manner, could no longer fail to perceive that something of unusual import was on his mind.

"What's the matter, Joe? Has anything in particular happened? You look as smiling as a red-skin over a scalp-lock."

"Wal, no—nothin' in partic'lar. Some Injuns come down the river this mornin' in a canoe, and put a squaw ashore here. Queer-lookin' critter, too; tickles me to think on't."

"Rather strange, I must say. I'm going out for another walk this morning;" and Will took his cap from its peg, buckled his belt around the waist of his blue hunting-frock, and sought the same spot where he had rested the evening previous.

Perhaps he imagined that the aerial visitant, who had entranced him with the magic of a song, would again bewitch his ear? While sitting thus, looking out upon the river, and absorbed in reflection, he heard the familiar voice of Joe Sykes behind him, speaking with unusual softness, and greatly modified from its wonted rough tones.

Half-turning around, he beheld a queenly figure in Indian costume, advancing toward him, her smiling eyes bent full upon him, and a warm, bright color suffusing her cheeks. She extended a little brown hand.

"Bessie Ryan!"

"Will Bently!"

He sprang to his feet in speechless astonishment, and, forgetful of time and place and circumstances, he drew her to his bosom in an embrace so fervent that he half-fainted in her clasp. The surprise and nervous shock had been too much for his invalid's strength, and Joe Sykes had to put his arm around both—to keep them from falling he afterward said.

"Caught, by Jinks!" he ejaculated, as he suddenly disappeared in the woods.

"Dear Bessie!"

"Dear Will!"

The cloud was rifted, and the sunlight of long-repressed love burst through in a flood, and their lips met in a kiss that

"Told the tale that the tongue
Was too timid to speak."

"But, my dear girl, do tell me about yourself—where you have been—and what endured—and how you came to be singing so near me last night!—and especially, what good fortune brought you here?"

"I have been a prisoner among the Delawares, and not long ago was ransomed by a trader, and had started toward home when a party of returning warriors met us and carried me back with them; but the chief who had adopted me was constrained by a promise to send me home. So I came with an escort of warriors and two of my Indian sisters. Last night we camped a mile or so down the river, as they had no desire to encounter the whites. When I found myself so near home—certain at last of my freedom—I could not resist the inclination to sing the song which I had never sung since we left the old farm."

"I well remember it, Bessie. I said that you should sing it for me again."

"But I did not dream that you would hear me."

It was determined that, upon the following day, Bessie, accompanied by Bently, Joe Sykes, and two others, should take a boat and start for the fort up the Kanawha. As to Will, there was never medicine so effective as the happiness which had so suddenly come upon him—nor was Bessie less affected, though she had long looked forward to the joy of her return. Probably never before had so happy a party sailed over the placid waters of the lonely river.

"Tell me now, dear Bessie, the story you have several times promised to relate. Let me hear about your Indian lover, and your release."

The two were sitting on a fallen tree near the river, where they had moored their boat and camped for the night. Thus appealed to, the maiden related the circumstances of her loss and her life among her captors, as the reader already knows them, but the incidents following her recapture by Tonowa we will narrate in her own words.

"I sunk into the deepest despair I had ever known when I found myself once more in my old wigwam, not free as before, but closely watched night and day. Sometimes Tonowa visited me. When he did I was always terrified, not by the harshness of his manner, but by the fierceness of his passion, the light of which burned in his eye. He loved as he hated, with all the force of his strong, uncontrolled nature.

"I learned, at length, what had been concealed from me, that Tonowa had been very seriously wounded in their battle with the whites—the same battle in which you were wounded I suppose, Will—and I pitied him deeply. I had noticed that he grew weak and wan in his appearance. I could see a change every time he came to my wigwam. He bore his sufferings with such heroism that, had he but been willing to accept the sisterly love I offered him, I should have been but too glad to have cared for him in any way that would have alleviated his misery. Finally he became aware that he was dying, and his desire to win from me a promise to become his wife grew more intense. I suffered almost as much as he, through sympathy and anxiety combined. I really had a strong affection for him," said the noble-hearted girl, with tearful eyes, "for he had been kind and generous to me, and it was to him, you know, that I mainly owed my rescue from the stake.

"One day his friends sent for me to come to his lodge, and I found that he was extremely low—I thought, dying. He looked at me with such a pleading, loving gaze, that it touched my inmost heart.

"'Tonowa is going,' he said, in a feeble voice; 'will not Eye-of-Night remember him when he is far away in the hunting-grounds of the Great Spirit?'

"I promised that I would never forget him, and the assurance seemed to please him. A moment after he asked:

"'When will she meet him in the happy country, where the young brave is forever beloved by his chosen one?'

"'The Great Spirit knows,' I answered, gently.

"The old chief, with others, was standing near, watching with grief-stricken faces the countenance of the dying brave who had been the hope and pride of the whole tribe.

"Tonowa reached forth his hand in search of mine. I placed it within his; it seemed to soothe him, and he lay quietly, with closed eyes, for nearly an hour; then he opened them, and spoke with considerable effort:

"'Would my white sister return to her kindred! She has dwelt with us long, but Tonowa is leaving her—he can not stay to dwell with her in the lodge among his people; she shall return. My father,' he motioned to the old chief, 'will send her down to the beautiful river when Tonowa has departed.'

"The old chief bowed his head, in token of assent, and Tonowa seemed to rest satisfied. He held my hand in his until his own relaxed in death. I honor his memory. I owed my freedom to him, at last as at first.

"After his burial they sent me away, parting with me in great sorrow, and many expressions of attachment."

"It is to Tonowa, then, that I owe my present happiness!" said Bently, gazing upon Bessie with eyes full of tenderness.

She turned aside her flushing cheek, but the gathering twilight did not conceal from her lover's eye the bright color and sweet confusion of her face.

A rustle on the bank below them was followed by the exclamation:

"Thar, ye've gone an' done it, Will Bently. The shoe is yours, for luck ye know;" and there fell in Bessie's lap one of her own old shoes.

"That was Joe's voice; but pray, what does this mean?" she asked, holding up the shoe.

Will laughed a good hearty laugh, and the voice of Joe responded from the stream below. Bessie, bewildered, but pleased, could but laugh too; and so the old woods were made merry with laughter.

Bently then rehearsed the incident of Joe's first introduction to the shoe, and added:

"I really had forgotten all about it, but it seems the faithful fellow has preserved it as his 'charm,' as he expressed it; and here he flings it at us, to consummate our good luck. I'll hug Joe Sykes for this."

Great was the delight of the settlers, and inexpressible the joy of her particular friends, when Joe Sykes burst into the village and announced the approach of the long-lost girl.

Jessie Wilmot—for such the little maiden had now become—was quite beside herself with joy; and her husband was but little less so, while the eccentric Kate Ryan, crowding back her thankfulness, assumed the stoic calmness she was wont to put on when her feelings were likely to overcome her, and the exclamation, "What's the use of going clean crazy!—reckon I *knowed* Bess was cute 'nough to take keer of herself wherever she was!" did not accord very well with the tenacity with which her arms clung round the returned girl's neck, and the streams of unchecked tears flowing quietly down her cheeks.

Long after, the happy Bessie, with her noble and prosperous husband, Will Bently, enjoyed the peace and prosperity that resulted from the trials and sacrifices of those early days. And as the rapidly extending line of the frontier receded further and further from their door, the visits of Joe Sykes became less frequent, until at length they ceased altogether. He evidently had "gone under," as he desired, on the trail after the red-men, whom he ceased to hate only with his last breath.

THE END.

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